

FATHERS AND OTHER STRANGERS

GORDON BLITZ

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DEDICATION

Steve Neil Johnson-friend and mentor

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Prologue

Dolores bellowed, “Jack, my water broke. We need to go to the hospital.”

“I thought you weren’t due until next month Dolores.”

“The doctor must have miscalculated. All I know is that this baby is ready.” Dolores grabbed her small pre packed bag for the hospital and waddled towards the door. Jack was smoking and told her, “Just wait until I finish this cigarette and then I’ll take you. Go down to the car and I’ll be there soon.” Jack wished Dolores’s parents were around to help.

During the short drive to Midway Hospital Dolores told Jack, “You’re going to be a father, Jack. Isn’t that exciting?” Jack’s face didn’t reflect any joy. After Dolores was admitted, Jack asked how long it would be before Dolores gave birth.

“Sir, we have no idea. Why don’t you just stay in the waiting room and we’ll let you know how your wife is doing.”

Jack grunted and sat. After an hour he had a nicotine fit and strolled outside for a fix. A bald man was joining him and said, “I can’t believe I’m going to be a father again at fifty.”

Jack replied, “You’re lucky. I’m just a kid. I have no idea how to be a father. My own father was an asshole.”

“Being a parent is no big deal. Look who knows how long we’re going to wait. It’s not even ten o’clock. Want to get a drink? There’s a neighborhood bar down the street.”

So, Jack and his new friend Alfred doused themselves with vodka to kill the morning and afternoon. Alfred looked at his watch, “Hey we better get back to the hospital. It’s almost five. Don’t want a pissed off wife who just gave birth.”

Jack and Alfred painlessly sauntered back to Midway and inquired about the labor status. Alfred’s wife had accomplished

bringing a six-pound baby girl into the world while Dolores was still struggling. Alfred departed while Jack stewed impatiently in the waiting room. The vodka was making him drowsy and lulled him to sleep until he was awakened at midnight.

“Congratulations, Mr. Pinchas, you have an eight-pound boy. Your wife is exhausted but I think it’s okay to see her and your new son.” Jack tried to smile. He was scared to see the child. What would he look like? Dolores wanted to name him after her Uncle Lynn. He kept telling her did we really want to saddle a kid with the name Lynn. She insisted and Jack didn’t feel like fighting with her. She was the kid’s mother.

CHAPTER 1

Who is Mark?

I was in a foggy depression. I'd been musing about Gilbert and loneliness was hovering over my day. I worried that 2019 would become a vile year. The quest to try to date was getting more difficult as I crept from middle age to senior status. At first the early retirement in 2018 had been a cluster fuck. The Director of Accounting job at California Health Resources (CHR) had ended after twenty-five years of servitude and I was fed up. I was forty-eight and after a disheartening job search, I wanted a change. My frugal lifestyle and a generous severance package had enabled a large nest egg. I knew CHR was covering my healthcare for free until I was sixty-five. Additionally, I had been paid a year's worth of salary and a lump sum golden handshake only if I signed papers stating I would never sue them for an illegal layoff. But on the first day of retirement, I realized the job had defined me. It had been tough reinventing myself. I tried comedy improv and standup comedy to keep me distracted, but the real salvation had been the LGBT Memoir class at The Village. And of course, my beloved temple, Beth Kol Hadashim. The rabbi was on sabbatical this summer and I would be making my debut as a theologian. I'd been asked to do a sermon and I found any opportunity to perform irresistible. You could say I was a closeted actor, never having fulfilled my original aspirations of attaining a Theater Arts Degree in college. But the remission from despair had ended abruptly.

When I heard the buzzer at my West Hollywood condo, I was startled. I wasn't expecting any visitors or deliveries. Oh, no, another buzzing sound. I just wanted to be left alone. Friday afternoon drew me into memories of Shabbat when Gilbert

insisted, we light candles, drink the latest Trader Joe's wine special and break challah bread with blessings.

“Who is this?”

“It’s Mark. I’m your son.”

“Is this some sort of con?”

“No. Please let me in.”

“No. You must have the wrong unit. Go away.”

“Isn’t this Lynn Pinchas? Unit 302?”

“What is this?”

My anger was building. How does this guy know my name and my unit number? This was nuts.

“Listen, there is a park next to your building. I just want to talk to you.”

“No.” I hoped this guy would give up if I just ignored him. Having the King’s Road Park next door had been a blessing and a curse. The view of shrubbery rather than the blight of another complex increased the value of my corner unit. The summer jazz concerts were priceless too, but I was plagued by noisy canines, piercing children’s birthday parties, and a hangout for the homeless. The damaging memories of my tenth anniversary refused to scar over.

The damn buzzer hit my hearing aids again. This time I went to the bedroom and slammed the door. The bell kept ringing. He wouldn’t give up. I had to get rid of him.

“Okay. I’ll meet you, but I’m just giving you five minutes to explain.”

I was wacky to do this. I don’t know what possessed me to meet this, Mark. And he thinks I’m his father. But I was intrigued, and maybe it would inspire me to write something. I’ve had writer’s block with my memoirs and tried a daily blog to get creative juices popping. The memoir writing was making

me delve into dark places smothering with honesty. Where was the cathartic experience that my fellow classmate writers espoused?

After I grabbed a blue cardigan sweater from the packed closet, I pulled back my vertical blinds hoping to catch a glance of this character in the park. I saw a man in a suit pacing. He looked harmless if this was Mark.

When I approached the man sitting on the park bench, I had an eerie feeling. His sorrowful green-blue eyes looked familiar and his strong smell was producing a wallop of fear. When he stood, he was shorter than my height of six feet. And because his suit was hanging off his frame, he appeared super-thin like me. Mark had that semi-youthful look that said leaving the twenties and entering the thirties. I refused to shake his hand when he came into my space. He had a tremor which made me uncomfortable.

“Just tell me why you are here. You don’t expect me to believe your crazy story.”

“I’ve been looking for you. Wanted information about who my father was.” His foot was tapping uncontrollably.

“I’m a gay man. What makes you think I’m your father?”

“It doesn’t matter about you being gay. Just let me tell you my story. After I left my foster home at eighteen, I started trying to find anything about my parents. My foster parents were of little help because I had been shuffled from one home to another. The trail was convoluted. I had to go through such bullshit to get birth records. All this red tape. Like it was a government secret.”

“Get to the point. I’m only giving you five minutes.”

“I finally found my birth certificate. It listed Jane Elaine Lippman as my mother. No father listed.”

“Did you ever find this Jane?”

“Another nightmare scavenger hunt. Remember, this was 1988 when she gave birth to me. It looked like a dead end until I found her death certificate. Thank goodness for the internet. AIDS was the cause of death. Another dead end until I found the doctor’s name, Jim Becker, on the death certificate. Finally, I might have a contact.”

The story sounded ridiculous, but I wanted him to continue so I could go back to my condo. Lightheadedness was crushing me as I listened.

“The doctor was retired but at least he was alive. He was living in Las Vegas so I drove out there. I prayed that he could help me. When he told me Jane was a prostitute, things started to make sense. That’s why there was no father listed and that explains why she had AIDS. Dr. Becker was the doctor she had been seeing after she was diagnosed with AIDS. She told him she’d given birth and gave the baby boy away for adoption.”

Mark started crying. I ached for him and this devastating conclusion.

“Mark, I understand how painful this must be. But what does it have to do with me?”

“The doctor gave me this letter my mom had written before she died.”

Mark handed me the letter. I felt like I was in a melodrama when I put my glasses on and began reading:

I know you’ll never forgive me for giving you away but I couldn’t bring you up having a mother as a prostitute. But I loved giving birth to you. It was a miracle that I got pregnant. I joked with the other girls that you were a virgin birth like when Mary gave birth to Jesus. I mean we were so careful. Always taking birth control pills. And we had started asking clients to wear a condom because we worried about getting AIDS. We never had accidents. Well, except sometimes if we didn’t get a prescription filled, we might

miss a day. That must be how you came to be. And if you’re reading this you probably want to know who your father was. I think his name was Lynn Pinchas. You don’t forget a name like that. One of the youngest clients I ever had. He was the last man I had sex with before I got sick. I gave birth to you nine months later. This could be your father. This virus is eating me alive. Remember, I loved you.

Mark remained silent after I finished reading the letter and told me, “I was so angry with the doctor. Why hadn’t he tried to find me? He said he couldn’t locate me.”

“It’s impossible. This must be a coincidence. Look, I’ve never had sex with a woman so I couldn’t be your father. I’ve heard enough of your story. You have the wrong Lynn Pinchas.”

“Look at me. We are connected. I know you saw that when you looked at me. This is a shock. I get that. You gave me five minutes and I’ve taken enough of your time. Maybe you’ve forgotten what happened over thirty years ago.”

I had an ache filling up my stomach and lunch was creeping through my esophagus looking for release. The park was cursed and if I didn’t leave, it would chew at my flesh.

I croaked, “I’m sick. Going to go back to my condo.” I foolishly thought going gluten-free would solve my irritable bowel syndrome.

“Here’s my phone number. Call me if you remember anything or better yet text me.”

He shook my hand and when I felt his flesh I relaxed. The stomach acid subsided as I walked away while I stuffed the card into my pocket with the name Mark Lippman.

Was Mark my doppelganger, a mirrored Lynn? How can this be? *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* came to mind. Something else about him bothered me. His smell reminded me of my father. The putrid urine odor after Dad had been drinking.

CHAPTER 2

A Mother's Secret

Disheveled from meeting Mark, I shuffled back to my condo sanctuary where I was greeted with licorice tea. After collapsing on my old Stratolounger, I started shoveling dead brain matter so I could extract jumbled gridlocked memories from over thirty years ago that Mark's narrative was triggering.

In July 1987 Mom took me to see the film *Witches of Eastwick*. It was our Sunday afternoon ritual. After the screening we ate at the Hollywood restaurant Tick Tock. The Cahuenga Boulevard eatery was a throwback to multi-course comfort food meals. We gobbled sticky orange rolls after the uniformed waitress found the perfect table for us. The establishment catered to older non-Jewish clientele who wore crosses adorning the necks of their overweight bodies. To clear our palette, lemon sherbet was served between starters and entrees. Clocks decorated the walls to identify the time and place of Tick Tock. At the end of the meal, I would loosen my belt so the food had a chance to digest in my stomach.

“So, who was your favorite actress, Susan Sarandon, Michelle Pfeiffer or Cher?

“Cher of course.”

“I know you love Cher as a singer. But what did you think of her acting?”

“So charismatic. I couldn't stop looking at her eyes and hair. I would love to be like her. Wear those beautiful gowns.”

“Oh, Lynn. You have such an imagination. Don't ever tell your father about these dreams.” Giggling was medicine. Without our Sunday special we couldn't survive the week.

“Mom, did you ever want to have another child? I always wanted to have a brother or sister.”

“I was afraid to have another child. It was a difficult birth. You were so stubborn, not wanting to leave my womb. I was in labor for 12 hours. And when you were born it felt like my insides were being ripped apart. I just couldn’t go through it again. I wanted to give all my love to you, Lynn.”

I accepted Mom’s explanation but the curse of being an only child corrupted the remainder of my life. Being shunned at school and friendless without a sibling to commiserate with, I only had my fantasy world to play with.

The following week Mom started having coughing fits. Denial ruled my world and then I heard alarm bells when she started shrinking.

“Mom. I don’t think you’ve worn that peasant skirt and paisley top since my bar mitzvah.”

“I’ve lost weight and now I can fit in it. Isn’t that great?”

“No, you’re too thin, Mom. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Lynn.”

“We should go to the Tick Tock every week. That would fatten you up.”

But by Labor Day she said, “Lynn, I’m not up for the movies and lunch.” Her quick descension to hell began. I began my solo sojourns to Hollywood for escape.

Within a month, Mom was in the hospital gasping for breath. I was afraid to hug her eighty pounds of flesh. Even with her gaunt face and enormous eyes, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Despite the antiseptic hospital smell, her lavender aroma filled the room. I longed for her to know me. Being an only child meant it would just be me and Dad. He was a lingering sore that would never heal. I hated him.

Even though Dad was eight years younger than Mom, I thought he had carved himself into an early grave with his incessant drinking and cigarette smoking. Nonetheless, it was Mom who died less than six months before I graduated from Fairfax High. I blamed Dad and his secondhand smoke that murdered Mom. The smoky smell that permeated our apartment would always remind me of Mom. She was always screaming at him, “Can’t you smoke outside? It stinks in here. No matter how much I use an air freshener, it doesn’t go away. Jack, you’re killing me.” I didn’t know how she put up with him. And when she was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer at forty-eight, he did snuff the life out of her.

When Mom mumbled, “I wish you’d met your brother,” a week before she died, I assumed it was the morphine drip talking. I had no brother and her words made no sense.

I was compelled to tell her, “Mom, what I’m going to tell you shouldn’t be surprising. You know how I never talk about girls. I’ve never dated.”

“Lynn, you don’t have to explain. I’ve known since you were a young boy. You cried so easily when you saw *The Sound of Music* for the first time. And I remember you telling me about the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. You wished Dad was like Atticus. You were sobbing.”

It felt like the cavity around my heart was going to explode.

“You were so sensitive, my sweet young man. But you must promise me you won’t tell your father. He won’t understand. And please don’t blame him for me getting sick. I used to smoke when I was a teenager. And Lynn, promise me you’ll take care of him too.”

“But he’s so awful. He doesn’t even like me.”

“Lynn, he’s a good man. I know he has flaws but he saved me.”

“What do you mean saved you?”

Mom didn't answer and drifted off. Later that week she transitioned. The speed at which she died of stage four lung cancer destroyed me. Just in time for Thanksgiving. Her lavender smell had begun dissolving. A sense of unfinished business gnawed at me. How had Dad saved her, and whether mentioning a brother was morphine-induced or a reality. When I asked Dad, "Before Mom died, she said she wished I'd met my brother. Do you know what she was talking about?" He said, "No, your mom was incoherent because they gave her those stupid drugs. They didn't even take away her pain. She wasn't herself."

After she died, I was stuck in prison with my father and I resented the promise I owed Mom that I would take care of him. Mourning Mom's death was trapped and congealed...never being released. And then the corruption of my first love by my father clogged my emotional pores. I hadn't realized the new ways Dad was going to brutalize me.

CHAPTER 3

Thirty Years Ago

In the year 1988 right after Mom died, graduation was looming in six months and escaping to Cal Berkley with my first boyfriend, Ethan, would give me freedom from Dad.

Oh God, I hadn't thought about Ethan in an eternity. A lovely boy I met in January. I had hustled the wounds of Mom's recent death into the closet and left myself open to anything to distract me. The immediate friendship with Ethan opened an umbrella of music- (Dylan to Motown to Springsteen to Sondheim), theater- (anything Terence McNally, cinema-(Spielberg), opera- (Grand Puccini), and ballet-(Baryshnikov). As we glued together, Ethan said, "I know you hate your name but I love it. I don't care that Lynn could be a girl or boy name." Each angle of Ethan's face was fearless. The way his eyebrows knitted together gave me chills. His skin was silky without acne craters that cursed my face. I was no longer ashamed of my name because of Ethan. He made me proud.

I melted when he began tickling me. The first human contact with another male. My father never touched me except for my feet. I had no idea that I was starving. The electric current was exploding on my virgin nerve endings when Ethan hugged me. Ethan was filling up my senses twenty-four hours a day. I hoped that we would talk about being gay. I wanted to tell him that I loved him but when Ethan said, "Isn't Susan hot? I've been out with her but she won't go beyond second base. I don't want to be a virgin when I graduate. What about you?" I caved and laughed because I couldn't tell Ethan that I wanted him to be my best friend, his only friend.

To create a distraction I said, “Did you hear that Michael Crawford will be doing *Phantom of The Opera* in Los Angeles? We’ve got to get tickets.”

“Sure, but Lynn, you have to have sex with a girl. It will change your life. Might even clear up your skin.” Only Ethan could talk about my skin without an ounce of cruelty.

Ethan had an old red Volvo that we used to explore the secret haunts of Los Angeles. Sitting on the edge of Griffith Park, we discovered Ferndell Park. Ethan said, “This trail is famous for pickups. Male hustlers hide behind trees.” Ethan confused me with his talk of hustlers. We parked off Los Feliz Boulevard and searched for the Ferndell trail that ended at the Griffith Park Observatory. The same Observatory where the iconic scene from *Rebel Without a Cause* was filmed. One of three films James Dean starred in before his untimely death.

The Volvo had no air conditioning and we stuck to the plastic car seats from the over ninety-degree sweltering heat. Upon entering the park, the temperature dropped ten degrees from the shade of towering live oak and sycamore trees. Ethan said, “Look at all these buttons, snails, and leatherleaf ferns. Someone brought these from Africa or South America.”

“Who made you an expert on plants?”

“Somebody has to know about this stuff. I had this crazy science teacher. He was like obsessed with flowers and plants.”

The surprising brook, miniature waterfall and little grotto made us giddy. It was a deserted Sunday morning so we had the area to ourselves. The trail began when the nature park dissolved and stopped enveloping our senses. We grabbed fallen tree limbs and used them for walking sticks as we pretended to be explorers. On each side of the trail, we saw wild jungle growth.

“Hey, wanna have some fun in the bushes?” Ethan mimicked how a hustler would sound.

“Sure. You are so hot.” I giggled.

Ethan fell off the path and ran over the crumbly brown leaves. We continued our role-playing.

“I’m going to get you. You can’t run away.”

He kept squealing like a pig. Just when my scrawny arms were about to pull at his waist, a grinding motor noise hit my ears. A bass voice boomed from a jeep, “What are you boys up to?” When the imposing man stepped out of his vehicle, we became aware that he wore an all-grey outfit. He looked like a uniformed officer without any identifying badge.

Ethan quickly replied while I shivered, “Just playing around.”

He asked, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“You look older. Get in the back seat. I need to bring you to the office for questioning.”

Ethan countered, “We weren’t doing anything wrong, sir.”

“You boys look gay. It’s illegal to have sex here.”

I remained paralyzed until Ethan shouted, “Run, Lynn.”

With an abundance of fallen trees and shrubbery we knew this man couldn’t catch up with us in his jeep. We had mastered track at Fairfax High and could easily outrun the mystery man. We were rabbits hopping until the officer was a lost speck.

The stopping point had given us a chance to swallow a balloon of oxygen. My white shirt had become soaked with sweat but Ethan looked just as handsome as the first day I met him. Sweat and jogging had agreed with him.

“We could have gotten arrested, Ethan.”

“No, I don’t know who that guy was but I don’t think it was the police. Not even a park ranger.”

Still out of breath we found a patch of carpeted foliage perfect for napping.

If only we could make a blood pact, the day would have ended perfectly. Ethan was sleeping when I whispered, “Prick my finger and let the oozing blood commingle with yours.” The luxury of a Sunday morning sleep with my best friend would have to suffice.

The day he brought the *Tom of Finland* book to my apartment exposed me to my first notion that being gay might be fun, not make me a pariah. I was gaining confidence that Ethan was gay. We kept flipping through pages of playful men with outrageous muscles enjoying the art of their bodies. Ethan giggled and then started recreating the exotic sexual positions with me.

“Come on, Lynn. Take off some clothes. What are you hiding? You never wear shorts or short-sleeve shirts. We can practice for when we have sex with girls.”

My body shamed me. The chest and back acne had turned me into a leper. No one could ever witness my ravaged torso. When Ethan stared at me for minutes without ever letting his eyes wander, I was spellbound. Then I became hypnotized when he removed each parcel of my wardrobe. Without flinching he kissed my chest. When his lips grazed my mouth, I started to cry. Then I heard a door creaking. It was three in the afternoon. Why would my father be here?”

“Ethan, it must be my father. Get rid of the Tom of Finland magazine. Shit, help me get dressed.”

“Oh boy. I finally get to meet your big daddy.”

“Just act normal with him.”

Dad’s eyes were darting through the room. His look of disgust when he saw Ethan frightened me.

“Who is this, Lynn? What were you guys doing? You both look guilty. Caught in the act.”

“My friend Ethan.”

Ethan replied, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Pinchas.”

“Yeh, yeh. I need to talk to my son. You can leave. Lynn doesn’t need any friends.”

And Ethan was gone and I was left to deal with the beast, the name I’d given my father. How could I be his offspring? I wanted to throttle him.

Jack had been a timid drunk, never hitting Mom. Drinking had accelerated after Mom’s death. After Ethan left, he said, “You are forbidden from seeing that faggot, Ethan.” Then he took me into the bedroom, slammed the door, and whacked me in the face. Before registering pain, stinging facial muscles, and disorientation, the beast took off his oversized black leather belt. He threw me onto the bed and began lashing my buttocks, repeatedly. A wave of nausea swept through my guts. Skin was breaking apart and my bladder went into overdrive, pissing into the mattress. When he realized what was happening Dad said, “You fuckn’ wet the bed. Big baby. Can’t even take a beating. Go to the bathroom and clean yourself up.” I remained in bed stripped of my humanity. After the beast apologized with, “I’m sorry, Lynn. Since your mom died, I’ve been drinking way too much. I swear I’ll never hit you again” I never forgave him even though Jack did keep his promise of no violence but the banishment of Ethan was crippling.

CHAPTER 4

Graduation Night Visit

Dad never showed up for my afternoon graduation ceremony. No family. Dad's parents had gone back to Poland in 1980. They hated living in America and even though I was their grandson it wasn't enough to make them stay. Mom never talked about her family when she was alive. Dad said they wanted nothing to do with her with no explanation. On graduation evening he was grunting and pacing on the green shag carpeting when I entered the apartment. He cornered me, "You ain't queer, are you?"

"No, what are you talking about?"

"I found this under your bed. Faggy stuff. Naked men." He threw the *Tom of Finland* book at me.

"You're not supposed to go in my room. We had a deal."

"There is no deal. I'm your father. Are you queer?"

I said, "No." What do you want me to do? I bet Ethan left those magazines. It's a joke."

"I told you to get rid of him. You can't be friends with a queer. You don't want to get AIDS, do you?"

I fretted about what was coming next when he grabbed my shoulders but the ranting about Ethan had exhausted the beast and his mood changed.

"I have a graduation present. Get in the car."

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

When we took Dad's clunker Chevy, the ripped vinyl car seat was sandpapering my skin. The tobacco permeating the

car seeped into my blue sweater. I thought I was going to pass out before we arrived.

“Dad, can you stop with the cigarettes? It’s making me sick.”

He rolled down the window and threw the butt out onto the cement highway.

I turned up the radio and “Kiss” was playing. I had a crush on Prince’s ambisexual image so I shouldn’t have been surprised when Dad said, “No fag music.” And I got chills when Prince sang the line, “You don’t have to watch *Dynasty* to have an attitude.” *Dynasty* was the highlight of my television viewing. I imagined being Joan Collins.

My stomach growled. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast because of my graduation ceremony nerves and I’d been throwing up the previous night.

“Dad, I just got a hunger attack. Can we get some food?”

“No Lynn. We’re here. This will be quick. It will just take thirty minutes. That’s all I paid for anyway. We’ll go to the restaurant, Marvins, afterwards to celebrate.”

What the hell was he talking about? Thirty minutes? Oh crap, not Marvins. I would heave up the few remaining morsels of food left in my gut if we went to Marvins.

“What is the surprise?” He refused to answer me. When Dad turned off the main street and started traveling along a pitch-black road, I started itching. I hoped scratching would distract my high anxiety level in the unfamiliar neighborhood east of Hollywood. We parked on a cul de sac with a house that had black steel bars covering every window. The front yard was covered with foot high weeds and cans of beer. With only moonlight and a broken cement path to the front door, I feared that I was going to be murdered. When my father began ringing the doorbell and no one answered, relief swept over me thinking it was the wrong address and I could escape. Dad used

his fist to pound on the door. Dust particles flew off the corrupted wood and I had a coughing fit. The squeaky door opened just as my heart began hammering through my ribs.

Dad took my hand like I was an infant and pulled me inside. The dirty faced man in a boisterous suit dragging his leg showed us into the damp moldy smelling room. The only furnishing was a stained, white couch.

Dad said, “We have an appointment.”

The man grunted and pointed towards a door that was peeling paint.

“What is this, Dad?”

“You are going to be made a man today”

I couldn’t grasp what was going on. The itchiness had subsided but my hand launched into twitching as my thumb rubbed against my palm.

“Lynn, you are going to have sex with a woman”

I frowned and said, “I don’t even know her. Is this your surprise?”

“You have thirty minutes to screw her. Then I’ll know you ain’t queer. My father did the same thing to me in Poland when I was your age.”

“I don’t want to do it.”

“No discussion. This is going to happen. I’m waiting right here.”

“You can’t make me do this.”

The door creaked open and a small washed-out woman entered. She hardly reached my chest. Her stiff face was arresting with large devouring eyes but with a smile that pacified me. Despite her height she muscled me into the bedroom while Dad remained plastered on the couch. Before

she closed the door, I saw her smiling at Dad, as though she recognized him.

The bedroom housed a large bed with an end table filled with whips, chains, handcuffs, and bottles of lubricants. I couldn't stop shaking.

"Hi, don't be nervous, I'm not going to hurt you. Tell me about yourself. It's rare that I get someone so young."

I wished for an out of body experience. If I could hover over the bed, I would stop witnessing the sexual assault. Chattering teeth refused to let a sound escape.

When she began removing her pink nightgown and revealed her breasts, I was shocked that I felt a vibration in my genitals. I never thought about women when I masturbated yet the curiosity of seeing this intimate part of a woman was arousing me. This was nothing like seeing pornography pictures. She took my head and gently positioned it near the nipple of her left breast. The warmth overpowered me. I thought of my mother. Not in a sexual way but a comforting and soothing experience. She had returned from the grave to grant me serenity and closure. I had never said goodbye. The beast refused to have an open coffin. Dad had his own demons corroding his life, the guilt, knowing his second hand chain-smoke had killed Mom's lungs. He didn't want to witness her ghastly body in the pine casket. Best to move on with his cursed life by drinking and smoking himself to death.

She tried putting a condom on my semi-erect dick. I had trouble concentrating on the task until she took my penis into her mouth. A rush was pumping me up.

"Lynn, get inside me."

Her hands tried to guide me until she was becoming frustrated that I couldn't stay hard. She was unable to cover my cock with a condom. Her sweetness had turned coarse. "Just do it, Lynn. I have another client coming. Your cheapskate Dad

only paid for a half hour.” I was lost inside her as I thought about Ethan and spaced out. I hated what I’d done to please my father. I broke free from her and removed myself from the mattress.

She said, “See that wasn’t so bad. Quick and dirty.”

I didn’t answer her. I only wanted to extricate myself from this sordid house. And images of my mom were anguishing me. I quickly assembled myself, left the poison room, and walked out of the house. I wouldn’t acknowledge the beast. During the transport home Dad said, “Well aren’t you going to thank me?”

I wanted to spit at him when I sarcastically said, “Oh, yeh Dad. Like now I am no longer a virgin. You don’t have to worry. I’m straight.”

The sensation of ants creeping up my leg was devouring me during the drive. At home I used scalding hot water and kept rewashing each part of myself until I finally felt clean.

When I crawled into my adult crib later that evening, I dialed Ethan’s number hoping I could share the nightmare. The endless ringing never went to voicemail. Each day I attempted to reach him. He had been banished. And when I visited his apartment, there was zero response to my knocking. Without any Ethan communication, I had lost a limb. I kept beating myself up. I’d been gullible thinking that Ethan would never abandon me.

A week later I got a letter from Ethan:

Dear Lynn,

Your father called my dad and told him about the Tom of Holland pictures. That I was a bad influence on you. We were hanging around each other too much. He didn’t want his son to be around a queer. That I was going to give you AIDS. My father had a fit. He forbade me to contact you. Since the summer session at Berkeley was starting, they

drove me up to San Francisco to get indoctrinated early. I didn't want to screw up my relationship with my parents. They've been good to me. They are paying for tuition and room and board. I am hoping this is just a blip. I'm not gay. For now, I think it's best that we don't communicate. I'm sorry. Maybe we can just be friends when you start attending Cal in the fall.

Ethan

I crashed after reading the letter and handcuffed any emotion I felt for Ethan until the start of school in the fall because he left a frayed thread that we could resume our friendship.

CHAPTER 5

The Prom

Fairfax High School prom was two weeks after the graduation ceremony. Dad kept hounding me.

“You’ve got to go. There must be some girl at school you like that you can ask.”

I thought being a friendless exile would excuse me from getting butchered at the prom. And then Carol Bunten with her close-cropped hair topping her hard-edged face and *don’t mess with my* reputation, found me. During lunch she approached me, “Hey Pinchas. Do you want to go to the prom?” Startled by the interruption of my coping daydream routine while I swallowed a bologna sandwich, I told her, “Are you joking?” We had acknowledged each other as outcasts without ever conversing.

“No, I think it would be really cool to show up at the prom. Prove to those popular assholes that we aren’t freaks. Get one of those big black limousines.”

“I don’t have a tuxedo.”

“You just have to rent one. I’m going to wear a gown.”

“Really. I’ve never seen you in anything but jeans.”

“I’ll get Daddy to give me a hundred dollars for the dress and I’ll find some cheap shit for fifty.”

When I broke the news to Dad he laughed and said, “Finally you are doing something normal. I was worried about you.”

“I need money for a tuxedo.”

“Whatever you want.”

“And a limousine.”

He grunted, “No way. I’ll drive you to the prom and pick you up at midnight.” Dad’s diabolical plan would ensure embarrassment and garbage status even with a date. I was all in for *Carrie*’s revenge. The Stephen King novel and film had roped me into bullying retribution. In the film *Carrie* uses her superpowers against her tormentors.

The only tuxedo available in my size was red which accentuated my pasty acne scarred skin. The insufferable bowtie challenge and toe squeezing shoe rental generated a torturous preparation. I refused to let Dad help me.

When I arrived at Carol’s house on Formosa, her lumbering father greeted me with a finger busting handshake. Carol’s short buzz type haircut was such a contrast to the frilly white gown dragging on the floor. She wore no makeup or nail polish. We each looked like cartoon characters uncomfortable in our costumes. Both of us were out of our element but at least we were going to the prom. Her father snapped a photo and said, “Your mother would have been so proud of you. Have a good time kids.” Neither Carol nor her father noticed that I had forgotten to bring a corsage.

Carol barked, “Where is the limousine?”

Carol was in a sourpuss state when I said, “My dad’s going to drive us.” Jack was in his quiet semi-drunk demeanor for the short ride. Still, the fantasy of recreating *Carrie*’s killing spree was a tonic infusion to the evening.

The gymnasium theme was Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. Servers and chaperones were dressed as zombies. Gauze was strewn from the ceiling and headstones decorated the floor. Strobe lights were bouncing off the walls. We felt invisible when we entered the room until the murmuring giggles started. Carol told me, “Just ignore those creeps. I’m going to the bathroom. This dress is too tight.” Left alone, the wolves were on the prowl when I looked for shelter.

My nemesis Richard grabbed me from behind and shouted, “Who’s your dyke date?” I slid away and searched for a corner to cower in. Carol never returned. Used and abused. The song list kept distracting me with “Billie Jean”, “Beat It”, and “Wanna Be Starting Something”. But when “Human Nature” pumped through the speakers and Michael Jackson was crying about being done wrong, the lining of my guts singed.

At midnight Dad’s disgruntled chariot beeped my attention.

“Why do you look so pathetic? Where is your girlfriend?

I didn’t answer him. Without sweet revenge whatever pittance of self-respect I had left was extinguished. The spineless vow to never allow myself to be manipulated by anyone ended the day.

CHAPTER 6

Surviving without Ethan

Mom had scraped together funds from the measly weekly allowance Jack gave her to enable me to attend Cal Berkley supplemented with a scholarship. A drama major was on the horizon but that got squashed in the letter that explained that the scholarship funds were exhausted. The calculations for room and board were insurmountable and I'd missed the cutoff for student aid or loans.

I still prayed that I would hear from Ethan by the end of the summer when he thought I would be attending Cal, but I was rewarded with deafening silence. Now reconnecting with him was shattered.

Murdered plans unless Dad helped. He said, "Why do you need to go to college? I never went. You said Mom left you money for college. What's the problem?" I was pissed. Dad had been an enabler, letting the comfort of not having to work spoil me. I learned to manipulate Dad through the allowance he gave me. Yet I was stoic all the time and stopped caring about Dad finding out I was gay. Let him find something else to be mad at me about. To appease the beast I went to Los Angeles City College.

I trudged through the summer until the first day of drama class at college popped. The rotting sting of not attending Berkeley with Ethan had finally passed. Ethan never answered phone calls or letters. I blamed the beast's rampage to continually botch my life. A form of moving on was the only option left.

As the Beverly Bus transported me to Vermont, my fantasy world exploded. Dreams of being a star and escaping the drudgery world that the beast forced on me was a distraction

from the fears of fitting in. The campus maze challenged me upon arrival. I searched for a compatriot to guide me among the rushing ants. A boy with a shocking pink shirt and ripped jeans must be an up-and-coming actor.

“Where is the drama department?”

His singsong voice said, “Follow me.”

“This is my first semester. Mr. Marlowe’s Drama 101.”

“I took that last year. He’s an unforgiving asshole but you’ll love him.”

When I entered the classroom and surveyed the competition I began sinking. I felt like an outcast when I saw the students that looked like they belonged in a casting call for the latest John Hughes epic or *The Lost Boys*. The guys were flush from the West Hollywood Athletic Club with muscles bursting from their skintight tee-shirts. The girls were ready for the model runway. I perched myself in the last row and waited to be destroyed.

Professor Marlowe insisted each of us stand front and center explaining our existence and why we were pursuing the acting profession. As each victim paraded across the front of the lecture hall, I shook uncontrollably, praying that they wouldn’t get to me. Ten minutes before class closure a petite girl was spotlighted. She told Mr. Marlowe, “When I saw this monologue performed by Catherine Burns in the film *Last Summer*, I was transformed into an acting machine. This plain freckled actress eats up the camera. She talks about the night her mother died after consuming enough whiskey to make her happy. Catherine’s character Rhoda goes to bed after her mom kisses her on the lips, Rhoda smells alcohol. Her mom drowns in the early morning while Rhoda is sleeping. I want to do this as my audition piece.”

I didn’t belong there. Out of their theatrical league. An imposter. A final coffin nail came next. I left class and while I

waited for the East Hollywood bus, I listened to my transistor radio. How could I resist dancing to “Straight Up” by Paula Abdul? Was I setting myself up to be attacked by letting my feminine characteristics run rampant? I felt like I deserved the pounding from the local bullies before the bus arrived. Bloodied knees barely let me climb the steps onto the bus.

When I told Jack, “It’s not safe. I want to go to UCLA.” He surprised me with, “If you insist then you have to take Accounting. You won’t need to work while you are going to school, because I’ll give you whatever extra money you need. I want you close so I can watch you.” I had no resilience to fight him. The bitter caveat that Accounting be my major was defeating me.

“I hate numbers. It’s boring. I would kill myself if I had to work with debits and credits all day.”

“If that’s what you want then you can move out or pay me rent.”

I dropped the drama classes, worked on transferring to UCLA for the next semester and retreated to the safety of debits and credits. My feeble self-esteem ruled the day.

CHAPTER 7

Meeting Gilbert in 2000

How did Mark suspect it was me? I couldn't have impregnated this prostitute. Could she have forgotten to take the pill like her letter to Mark said? And wouldn't a prostitute get an abortion instead of giving birth to an unwanted child? I fretted about having sex with an AIDS infected prostitute without catching the disease. Too much to process.

If I had a son and heir, what would that mean? What if Mark was interested in inheriting my well-earned fortune? My plateau of emptiness could unleash purpose. Parenting was the conversation I had with my lover Gilbert after we'd coupled for two years.

“I want to adopt a child. We’d make great parents. And think about all the things we could teach a child. We have such eclectic music tastes between Streisand, Leontyne Price, Janis Joplin, and Barry Manilow. And the literature of Iris Murdoch or guilty pleasure Jackie Collins. You could teach a kid how to write poetry like Walt Whitman. How to look at a Rembrandt and Jackson Pollock painting.”

“Hold on, Lynn. I am in the middle of getting my Ph.D. at USC and I want tenure too. No way we could have a child.”

“But I want to leave a legacy behind. I’m an only child. I have no relatives. What if something happened to you? I would have nothing. And when we get old, we’ll have someone to take care of us.”

“Lynn, you don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. We’re both healthy. We don’t need babysitters. We can talk about this when I get tenure.”

On Bastille Day, we would have been a couple nineteen years. Wouldn't it be a delicious sign from Gilbert that Mark was my flesh and blood.

It was time to tackle the part Gilbert played in my memoirs. Nineteen years ago, I had become aware of Gilbert at Temple Beth Kol Hadashim before the turn of the century. Gilbert was giving the sermon to celebrate the thirty-year anniversary since he turned thirteen. He told the congregation, "My name is Gilbert and I'm a Jewish man who has never had a bar mitzvah. I didn't believe in God and didn't want to be a hypocrite like my friends who were only in it for the big party and gifts. I guess I had progressive parents and they were okay with my decision. In fact, when they asked Rabbi Solomon at Olympic Boulevard Temple, he said the ceremony isn't a mandatory rite of passage. Jewish law says it wasn't required. When I started attending services at BKH and reconnected with my Judaism, I began to understand the meaning behind the bar mitzvah. Thirty years later, I figured this was a good time. It means something to me now. It's a miracle." Gilbert's voice faltered and initiated a hushed silence. The witnessing of this life cycle event brought the congregation to an emotional catharsis. He continued his sermon and talked about intimacy with God. As he roamed the *bimah* pulpit, I fell in love with his melodic voice. I wished I could command an audience like Gilbert. I wanted to date him, but I was told Gilbert was off-limits.

My busybody neighboring congregant Jonah said, "Lynn, you do not want to get involved with that man. First off, he's thirteen years older than you. A different generation. And he's had so many boyfriends. He's a player. I wouldn't trust him. And a cock tease also." I crossed him off my list of future husbands.

In 2000 we met at one of those progressive restaurant dating groups. Slightly less stressful than speed dating. With speed dating there was an inner and outer line. You were forced to make conversation with whoever was in front of you. If there

was mutual admiration, then you were allowed to exchange phone numbers at the end of the event. A bell would ring, the line would move and you had another chance of capturing a new dating victim. With the progressive dining group, you conversed with whoever was sitting in front of you or either side at the dinner table. Then between courses you casually moved to apprehend the interest of a new group of three men. Gilbert Barenstein appeared between mango sorbet and rosemary infused chicken at gay friendly mock healthy Happy Eats on Santa Monica Boulevard.

He kept staring at me. “Do you belong to Temple BKH? You realize how handsome you are. Ever been to one of these groups before?” He didn’t let me speak. His nervous bubbly energy was compelling. When he flashed his ocean eyes, I couldn’t look away.

As the evening drooped, he pulled me aside. “Wasn’t this a bore? Why don’t you come to my house Saturday night?” I felt gratified to have someone smitten with me. I didn’t need to work at it.

He lived in Long Beach but I made the terrifying crawling traffic drive. When he came to the door of his cottage, we hugged. The cluttered living room had piles of *New Yorker* magazines and *New York Times*. The mish mash of furniture styles from the ‘60s (bean bag), ‘70s (rattan chair), and ‘80s (leather couch) attempted to create an organized mess except for the muscular round rosewood dining room table. The tough burly placemats and earthy china filled the table.

He surprised me with an irresistible, “I thought I would make dinner.” We were off to the races to make sure our bellies were satisfied. Gilbert’s playfulness included grabbing my leg while we ate and fidgeting with my zipper.

After dinner we moved to the sofa and kissing was initiated.

As my probing tongue reciprocated, I suddenly felt Gilbert back away.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I’m enjoying getting to know you.”

“Who said we were going to have sex tonight?”

I retorted, “Who said anything about sex?”

He got up off the couch, walked into the adjacent bedroom and closed the door. I was severely confused and scared. I was going to leave without saying goodbye to his rudeness. But then I heard a soaring melody emanating from the bedroom. The voice of soprano Leontyne Price was flying. I edged toward the door and heard, “Gilbert”. The door creaked open and his hand gently pulled me into the pitch-black room. Gilbert hypnotized me towards the mattress. Slowly snapping off my clothes and vacuuming away all my frustration of his earlier cock teasing. He locked my love that night. I loved his spontaneity versus my anal control. At thirty it felt like I was making love for the first time.

Gilbert moved into my West Hollywood condominium three hundred sixty-five days later. It had taken the learning curve kinks a year to get resolved. Not only was Gilbert a late-night person but aggravatingly late for all engagements. The opposite of my early morning productivity and being annoyingly early. His contradiction of being sloppy and germaphobic was incomprehensible.

USC hired him as a part-time English professor in 2002. He immediately began the trajectory of getting a Ph.D to ensure a full-time tenured position. The stars were aligning when I got promoted to Director of Finance the same year. Short-lived bliss.

CHAPTER 8

Life with Gilbert

In the summer of 2003, Gilbert insisted we take our first vacation. This was another milestone because I'd never ventured outside of Los Angeles. The holiday was filled with mysticism, different from the spirituality I sometimes felt at temple. We began in Whitefish, Montana working through Glacier National Park to Yellowstone and ending in Grand Teton, Jacksonville, Wyoming. We'd worked out the snarls of living together. We were on the same page with gaining weight to our ribby frames. At restaurants Gilbert would ask the waitress, "What is the most caloric item on the menu? That's what I want." The competition to see who could gain more pounds added an extra ingredient to the trip.

The bus tour arranged by Great Travel kept us engaged for eight days. From the moment we ate our first huckleberry at the Whitefish diner, we knew what dying and going to heaven felt like. Each future stop mandated the huckleberry taste test. I was amazed at how easy it was to be traveling with Gilbert.

In Glacier National Park we luxuriated in Big Trees Lodge built in 1913. The immense Douglas fir logs were brought by train and assembled by a crew of seventy-five men over a year and a half.

We hiked by gurgling mammoth hot springs in Yellowstone and patiently waited for Old Faithful to do her magic every forty-five minutes. The grand finale in Jacksonville smashed our senses.

The Snake River in Grand Teton filled me with dread. The culmination of the eight-day Glacier Park and Yellowstone tour brought me to this final adventure. I gasped when I realized this rubber raft would hold twelve prisoners for two

hours. With no back support, inflammation welcomed the excursion. When the life jackets were placed on me, I rebelled against what felt like a formfitting brace. I began my recurring tape of catastrophizing the future.

The raft was split in two with Captain Josh holding court in the center. Six victims in each section. After seven days of touring together, it was the first time to be physically separated from Gilbert.

The rocking motion didn't nauseate me but each bump screamed at my vertebrae. The stiffness of sitting at the edge of the raft resulted from the immobilizing fear of falling into the river. I searched for a distraction daydream and quickly found a solution with our captain, Josh. With his twenty-year old stamina sprouting, I could channel into his energy. Josh would save me.

He started the tour with the explanation, "I could give you a prepared history of this area of the Grand Teton. I think it would bore you. Why not just batter me with questions? Are we all on board with that?"

We sighed with relief. My inquisitive brain was ready for action.

"Is the raft the only form of transportation? No row boats, motor or sailboats."

"Correct. And it's only been the last hundred years that this mode was used. Because of the shallowness of the river, it could be crossed by walking. Indians, bisons, bears, and elk used their feet."

Josh seamlessly used his muscular, slightly sunburned arms to propel the raft with the tentacle oars. I couldn't keep my eyes off his elongated arms. Josh was our engine. The swinging motion sashayed us smoothly through the terrain. His lip exposed a bleeding cold sore that he kept licking. A facial flaw that made him human. He told us, "Sometimes I do three river

raft trips in one day with a mere ten-minute break between runs. But it doesn't feel like work to me. You know I'm from Texas and this landscape is heaven to me."

Each word professed his nature love and was orchestrated with his effortless lifting of the oars. The swishing splash lulled me into a meditation coma. The vision of synchronized swimming by small ducks awakened me. A carbon copy of the synchronized swimming that I'd seen at Gilbert's swim meets. The V-shaped pattern glided by the raft. The mini ducks periodically rested and flipped their heads into the water in search of their next meal. The remaining visual image was of their wiggling feather tails. The giddy smiles that erupted on the raft passengers turned to screams.

When the current began rushing Josh told us, "Hang on. We don't want to lose anybody when the water gets rough."

Instantly I saw Gilbert diving off the raft. An elderly tourist had fallen and before Josh could rescue her, Gilbert became the hero. Applause filled the rafts when she was returned to safety.

Josh asked, "I am so sorry. This hasn't happened before. Are you alright?"

The trouper responded, "I'm fine. And this gentleman did a great job of saving me."

Josh replied, "Do you want to go back?"

"Hell no. This will be a great story to tell my grandchildren. The strong sun is already drying my clothes. I want to see the rest."

So, the raft continued and served as a perfect emissary to the concluding dramatic vista. An unblemished sky made the Grand Teton mountaintops easy to grasp. Josh said they represented three breasts. Original French settlers in Wyoming named the three peaks South, Middle and Grand Teton. "Les Trois Tetons". The tallest of the three meant "the big tit." I was reminded of the Maria Fortuny painting of the ragged

Montserrat mountains above Barcelona. I imagined myself skipping from tip to tip.

Amnesia took my inflammatory back anguish into remission. I tricked myself to be ache free. And when the rigidness flared, I stood in the raft. I couldn't fathom a wind wave throwing me overboard. But if I were stricken, Gilbert would save me. He would scoop me up before I drifted away. Gilbert's arms would hold my one-hundred-forty-pound frame like I was a butterfly.

Josh was finishing the tour. I couldn't stop staring at his cap and sunglasses that were providing partial protection for his deeply innocent face. The brownish red bandanna covered his perky neck.

Gilbert had raised my self-esteem and given me the right to flirt with Josh. Gilbert didn't have any jealous cells but I didn't want to test this fresh three-year old relationship, so I stopped daydreaming.

120 minutes had elapsed and we were escorted off our raft. A generous tip was due. Josh would chalk the cruise as a badge of courage where disaster had been subverted.

I saw Gilbert beaming at me. "I was so proud of you, Lynn. You are fearless. I saw you standing. And you didn't freak out. You looked like you were in a happy state. I love you." I felt a tingle on my lips when I kissed Gilbert.

"But you saved the day, superman. I love you."

Later that evening the tingle became a throb. Two hours of water reflecting on my face must have burned my lips. The long-sleeve shirt and pants combined with a bandana and large brimmed hat could only go so far to protect my mouth.

On our last night at the Jacksonville Hotel, I heard a crash in the bathroom. A loud scream from Gilbert woke me from my daze of final day vacation-ending blues.

“You okay? I heard a scream.”

“No, I slipped getting out of the shower and banged up my toe on the shower ledge. I think it’s bleeding.”

Nurse Lynn Pinchas went into action, “Oh shit. You really hurt yourself. I better get some Band-Aids from the front desk. Just use a towel to stem the flow.”

After I returned from the hotel lobby, Gilbert’s toe was still oozing. I helped him use another washcloth to clean the wound. Attaching the bandage and holding it in place began working. Thankfully the tour was over and we’d be flying home the next morning. Gilbert asked for a wheelchair at the airport rather than limping through the maze of security and check in. Upon arrival in Los Angeles, the toe had healed. Disaster partially averted but within two days I was rewarded with a herpes cold sore eruption. A present from Josh. Temporary loving scabs covering my orifice. No forgetting this river journey. I knew how contagious cold sores could be and I hoped I had not infected Gilbert.

2003 was closing out and we sojourned to Palm Springs for New Year’s Eve festivities. We stayed at the intimate Coyote Inn with its burnt orange decorations that reminded us of an ancient Spanish village. On New Year’s Day morning 2003 we planned to attend a stomach busting buffet brunch at Ritz Carlton in nearby Rancho Mirage.

“Gilbert, something’s wrong. The sheets are wet.” When I rolled towards him my pores became clogged with the dampness from Gilbert’s sweat on the mattress.

I told him, “Why don’t you take a shower? You’ll feel better.”

“I think I have a fever. Did we bring any Tylenol?” Exhaustion cemented him to the bed.

I insisted on a long shower with the sunrise warming through the glass skylight. When I scrubbed the sweat off his

body, Gilbert did get invigorated. But my fear factor insisted we check out after a quick breakfast. Even in 2003, AIDS apprehension exploded because Gilbert complained about a recurring cough. And he looked so thin. Any weight gain during the summer vacation had evaporated. His Levi's were falling off his waist. I noticed a cold sore on his lip.

Once ensconced in our condo, Gilbert's cough vanished. And with a regimen of malts, protein bars, and nightly Häagen-Dazs we both were on our way to being our version of overweight. I still loved worrying about AIDS.

The last time we talked about HIV was before he moved into my domain. When I asked about his playboy reputation he laughed and told me, "It was total bullshit. You are my first real love. Sure, I went out with tons of guys but we rarely had sex." I believed him.

I had a miniature sex life and felt no risk of infection. And after taking the test in 1992, I proudly labeled myself benign. Vanilla sex ruled my life. In the new century we had been indoctrinated to think HIV was a manageable disease. But I was still haunted by the soaked linen. I had to ask, "Gilbert. Did you ever get the HIV test? I assume you were negative."

"Of course. I've been tested and it was negative."

We decided to both get tested at the Hollywood Clinic, just to rule out AIDS even though we were monogamous. Practicing safe sex should guarantee a negative result. The prick of my largest vein rushed blood into the vial. Gilbert got punctured after me. I winced watching the needle enter his arm. Results would be ready in twenty-four to forty-eight hours by phone. We got an assigned number to ensure confidentiality.

Ignoring a frightful outcome, we entertained ourselves at the cinema during the two-day wait. First off was *Chicago* that blasted across the Chinese Theater in Hollywood. From the opening production number, "All That Jazz," we harkened back to the days of roadshow Broadway adaptations of the

1960s...a roadshow engagement where you'd get a reserved seat and be able to purchase a booklet program with photographs and articles about the movie. It was as though you were attending a Broadway musical. Upon reaching home after the second movie day experience of *The Pianist*, without a chance to unwind, the phone rang. We both looked at the instrument and decided who should pick it up. I grabbed the telephone.

“Hello.” The crackling voice was difficult to hear.

“This is the health center. Did you have an HIV test recently?”

A wave of flushness overpowered me when I said, “Yes. Do you have the results?”

“I need the number that was given to you for security purposes.”

“67847778.”

They replied, “No, we have a different number.”

“Oh, it must be for my partner Gilbert. I’ll give the phone to him.”

“My number is 67847779.”

Gilbert anxiously stared at me. The room was entombing us until I heard, “Yes, yes. I understand,” that shot through his unemotional face. I couldn’t tell if he was playing with me, drawing out the much-anticipated response.

“It came out positive. They want me to test again. Could be a false positive.” My stomach muscles were clobbered.

Before processing could begin, the phone clanged. My brain plummeted. *You are going to be infected.* The bathroom incident in Jacksonville when I bandaged his bloody toe began to haunt me. And the herpes outbreak was alarming.

Gilbert gave a loving stare to calm me, and then I heard, “Negative.”

Tears poured from Gilbert’s hugs. I threw out my catastrophizing with, “Let’s wait until you take the test again before we go into panic mode. Even if you have HIV, it’s not a death sentence. I mean you have the strongest immune system. You never get the flu.”

But the second test was positive. The quest to find the best immunologist with expertise in HIV began. When we questioned Dr. Blair about how Gilbert’s HIV status could change from negative to positive, he said, “Since it had been ten years since your last test, it’s possible you had a false negative reading.” Once Doctor Blair found the correct dosage of the HIV drugs, the anxiety level simmered. Gilbert had become fearless about the diagnosis. We became organic junkies and I took impeccable care of him. Still, I turned into a hypochondriac about my lover. When he coughed, I said, “Oh God, you’re going to get pneumocystis pneumonia.” A pimple that wouldn’t heal, “Gilbert, is that Kaposi Sarcoma?” His viral load was low and he remained asymptomatic through the first decade of the new century. Gilbert refused to let an opportunistic infection attack him. And with the introduction of the latest *cocktail*, we finally believed AIDS wasn’t a doomsday disease. But sneaking up on me was a recurrence of panic. I thought I’d been cured by medicine and Dr. Stillman, who I considered my shaman.

I began seeing Dr. Eric Stillman in 2003 after my lover Gilbert’s AIDS diagnosis. He would be my longest engagement with a psychologist. I thought I had conquered my initial confrontation with panic attacks that had started in 1992 when I couldn’t perform in bed.

At twenty-two my genitals refused to work when I met this guy who looked like a mash-up of Ethan Hawke, Mark Wahlberg, and Antonio Banderas. Clear silky skin free of any

blemishes. I saw a slight scar above his eye. An imperfection that startled my senses. The deep inset blue eyes were complimented by high cheekbones. I saw the bulge of muscles from his unbuttoned shirt. A few curly hairs caressed my eyes. The perfectly aligned teeth smiled sensually. His deep voice beckoned through the bedroom. The hair on his forearms formed a vivid design that streamed to his wrist and hands. When his fingers came toward me, I was overwhelmed. I started to undress. Why would he be interested in me?

I should be rigid. He ought to be my type. I tried to loosen up. Yet my genitals felt rubbery and lifeless.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

I was embarrassed to answer.

“Let me help you relax.” He started giving me oral sex. I felt like I owed him an erection.

My genitals were dead to the world. My humiliation multiplied.

I reciprocated by kissing his penis. My nerves were stifled.

“I have some poppers. Do you want to try them?” he pleaded.

The evening blurred. Walls were crumbling around me and I could not breathe. This mysterious malady needed Sherlock Holmes to find the source of my impotency.

It took my first lover Gilbert to conquer the sexual panic attacks that bludgeoned me through my twenties. I had overcome the anxiety episodes without medicine or talk therapy. But now they came back with a vengeance. Gilbert had taught me that it was okay to ask for help.

After being in the waiting room for ten minutes for my first appointment with Dr. Stillman, I saw a delicious patient flipping a red switch. How could a man boiling with gorgeousness need help? Then I realized this must be the way

you announce your presence. Seconds after the switch lit up for Doctor Stillman, he appeared and led me down the hall. After entering Dr. Stillman's tastefully done office with a long brown leather couch and tissue boxes, I began to unwind.

“Can I offer you anything to drink?” were his first words.

“Coffee with cream.” He smiled and returned quickly to begin our fifty-minute session. Stillman was in his late forties. His exaggerated arm muscles were bulging from his tight knit shirt making my first impression of a West Hollywood stereotype. But as he spoke, the melodic tones were refreshing and he gave me an impartial voice.

After six months of treatment, the brain clutter was beginning to get organized. Dr. Stillman reframed the way my brain was being managed. He would tell me, “Lynn, do you realize how strong you are? Surviving your mom’s death and a dysfunctional relationship with your father. You became a successful CPA. You own your condo at thirty-three. Few of my clients attain that. And you have a support system at temple.” When I told Dr. Stillman that I couldn’t concentrate because it felt like my heart was galloping to a finishing line, he explained, “Lynn, I am not surprised this is happening. Having a lover diagnosed with AIDS would eventually take a toll on you.”

“I need to see a psychiatrist so I can get some relief from this constant focus on my heart beating. It feels like my heart is ready to leap out of my chest. I’m so screwed up.”

Dr. Stillman suggested the Herville Group, which also resided in the building. When I googled the group, it was referred to as Happy Life. The office didn’t have the magic red buttons to announce myself. Instead, there was a young receptionist who welcomed me and said, “Did you fill out all your paperwork online including your electronic signature?”

“I think so.”

“Have a seat. Dr. Herville will be with you shortly.”

After thirty minutes I lost control. Just as I was about to leave, the door opened and the doctor introduced himself, “Sorry, I had an emergency.”

Doctor Herville grilled me about my family history. The emotional scabs that had healed, got infected and oozed pus from Dr. Herville’s interrogation. I had unnecessarily been a spigot of information revealing my list of traumas.

“How did you feel when your mother died? Why did she tell you to keep your gayness a secret? What happened when you found out your lover had AIDS? Have you been to Al-Anon to deal with your father’s alcoholism?”

After the initial intake at the Herville Group, I flipped from doctor to doctor at the clinic until the dosage and combination of antidepressants were determined. I had immediate relief and began functioning full throttle again. The obsession with the negative temporarily evaporated.

Being on the correct dosage enabled me to drop The Herville Group. Dr. Stillman advised me that my primary care doctor could handle my prescriptions.

CHAPTER 9

Lunch with Mark

Mark's tall tale titillated me. I hadn't realized that the possibility of having procreated would be a combination of horror and exhilaration.

Within a day of meeting Mark, I called him, "I want both of us to take a DNA test just to prove I'm not your father."

The phone silenced until Mark spoke, "Okay, but Lynn, I know you are my father. I've been looking for you for ages. Can we meet for lunch? I have so much to tell you. When I talk to you it's like a mirror of myself."

I began bubbling with suspicion. An exquisite change that could accentuate my boring life, but I was such a realist, unable to believe Mark. He must have a hidden agenda. He thinks he's seeing me through a looking glass.

I reluctantly replied, "Okay I'll meet you for lunch."

Lunch at the vegan restaurant Passion Fruit was my pick. Saturday allowed Mark to arrive in casual Dockers and a blue knit short-sleeve shirt. When we greeted each other, Mark approached me with widened arms. I backed away from the embrace, fearful that I would let him swallow me. Passion Fruit was a sedate soundproof establishment where I could focus my attention on Mark. Our corner table had a tinted window view of Melrose Avenue. The waiter said, "Anything to drink?"

"Just water for me. Mark, did you want something?"

"Yes, I'd like a glass of red wine." The server handed us menus and grunted, "Fine. Let me know what you want?" He quickly turned and marched away.

Mark began, “First off I was thrilled that you called me so quickly. I was so worried after I barged into your life that you would dismiss me. That you would think I am some sort of crackpot. So, thank you.”

“I still don’t believe you but I am intrigued. It’s a convoluted story and it’s hard to believe that we are somehow related. Being an only child was isolating and I felt deserted losing mom to lung cancer when I was a teenager. Sometimes I thought of myself as being adopted because I was nothing like my father. And both parents were also only children. I had no siblings or relatives. So yes, when I met you, I thought to myself, is this story true? I convinced myself that I saw pieces of me when I looked at you.”

Mark’s eyes were filled to the brim, stopping before a release of tears.

“That has been my whole life until we met last week. I felt like a visitor from Mars. My foster parents were great but still, you can’t imagine the feeling of never really belonging. I would dig my fingernails into my wrists to distract from the pain of being alone.”

Mark reminded me of my friend Carl who did the same thing to his palms. In the 1990s my friendships were initiated at the LGBT Temple, BKH, where I met Carl. He had a boyish face with closely cropped hair. Being a West Hollywood resident and Broadway trivia maven made us a natural fit, plus we both were trounced by recurring emotional battlefields. Carl’s chaos included his failed marriage when he and his wife both revealed that they were gay and then divorced. Carl’s brother, Fred, was a cutter and Carl tried to stop Fred’s habit of cutting the insides of his legs. Because Carl and Fred were both adopted, Carl believed that was the source of their dysfunction. He told me, “When we looked at our parents we felt like extraterrestrials.” I commiserated with Carl about the feelings I had about my father.

The first time I saw Carl wear a short-sleeved shirt I saw ridges were grooved into his wrists. I pondered about this being his version of cutting when I saw the reddish marks that remained on both his arms. I wished I had a method of expunging emotional agony but I couldn't tolerate that kind of assault on my body.

When his mother was diagnosed with lung cancer, I was able to help him without wilting in my grief about my mom's death from the same disease.

I yearned for Carl to guide me through this possible discovery of Mark being my son. Carl could have given me a perspective on Mark's feeling of being an orphan. But Carl was another abandoned friendship that had mysteriously dissolved.

The waiter interrupted with a monotone, "Have you decided yet?" I was on the road to writing a negative yelp review.

When Mark raised his hands from his lap to observe the menu, I saw a tremor. When he saw my look of concern he said, "I shake when I'm nervous. I know I should see a doctor about this but I have a hard time getting off from work."

"Where do you work?"

"I'm a checker at the Hollywood Trader Joe's and can't afford to lose any hours. My roommate moved out and having to come up with rent is tough."

Apprehensive that Mark would ask me for money so I quickly responded, "I love Trader Joe's. I go to the West Hollywood store daily."

"Lynn, I feel like I'm floundering without a guide. I just turned thirty-one and this is the longest job I've been at. Almost two years."

"I'm sorry I can't help you. I wouldn't know where to begin guiding you. I have enough trouble running my own life since

I retired. What about college? Didn't that give you some direction?"

"I never finished because I hated studying. I thought I wanted to be an actor or a teacher but I just didn't fit in anywhere. Enough about me. What about you?"

Had he inherited my dreams of wanting to be an actor?

I told him, "I'm a retired CPA and I'm writing my memoirs. Don't laugh. I mean what could be more boring, but since I've been taking this writing class it seems I have a story to tell. I mean I don't know if anyone would be interested."

"Can I read some of what you've written? I've been following your blog. That's how I found you. You have to admit Lynn Pinchas is an unusual name."

So that is one solved mystery, but was this just a random search? Was I being stalked?

"After the DNA test, maybe I'll show you my memoirs. It's very personal stuff that I haven't shared with anyone except other students in my class. We have a rule about our work being confidential."

I didn't want to tell Mark that my memory about the prostitute encounter had resurfaced. Why should I get his hopes up?

"Can I ask you about when you knew you were gay?"

I was taken aback by this question but his soulful eyes forced me to explain., "I mean I was always being made fun of. At first, I didn't know what they were talking about when they called me fag. My parents never talked to me about sex. I had almost no friends until I met Ethan in my senior year at Fairfax. I was a late bloomer. But I started obsessing about this guy and I wanted to spend every day with him. He wasn't what you would consider typically good looking, but to me, he was perfect. Still, it wasn't the sexual act. We never had sex.

Something else was going on. This feeling with another boy that I couldn't imagine feeling with a girl."

"What happened to him?"

"Ethan vanished. I'm cursed. And then my lover of nine years, Gilbert, died. What about you? Any relationships?"

"Sorry to hear about that, Lynn. I appreciate you being honest with me. No one wants to talk about sex. I've never gone beyond dating girls. Sometimes I think I am asexual. I just don't think about sex very much, I'm embarrassed about this tremor. Like I'm an old man."

I was afraid to ask him about the shaking so I changed the subject, "So, you work at Trader Joe's but what do you do with your free time?"

"Movies. I see at least two films a week. I'm not a snob. I'll see anything. I loved *Get Out*, *Moonlight*, *Roma*, *The Avengers*, and *RBG*. And it must be in a movie theater. No television and no streaming."

"Well, we have that in common. Although I would skip *The Avengers*. *Black Panther* is more my type of superhero."

"We should go to the movies sometime."

I kept staring at his ears. Gilbert used to say that the best way to tell you that people were related was by matching ears. Mark's ears had an odd shape, like mine but smaller. I had felt self-conscious about my ears. It wasn't so much about the size but they were pointy. I begged Dad to let me have surgery. Of course, he refused. He wouldn't pay and I had to wear my hair long so it covered my ears. And then the beast would complain I looked like a girl.

The two-hour lunch was ending. I scooped up the bill before Mark had an opportunity. Mark had eroded my incessant funk. His voice held my attention so I could forget about isolation. I

was itching to bear hug Mark, the thread of a chance that he could be my flesh. Shared blood.

As Mark rose, he stretched out his hand. I edged towards him and rather than take his hand, I enveloped him into my arms. He pulled away before I could stop his trembling.

“I’m sorry; I need to go. When you arrange for the DNA test, call me. Thanks for lunch.”

And he was gone. A whispering scent escaped. I was emotionally stifled by his abrupt disappearance.

CHAPTER 10

Heritage Plus

Now I was focused on solving this Mark mystery. Googling for DNA home testing would prove to be easy, efficient, and quick. *Heritage Plus* charged \$179 for a son and potential father link. The \$69 for an additional person confused me. If I wasn't Mark's father would that mean there was another possibility?

I waited twenty-four hours before I called Mark. Bursting pride was consuming me. I could pay for Mark to go to college. I have a second bedroom. He could live with me. Who was I kidding? Was I insane to let this stranger into my life? My accountant's brain was always looking for a quick and dirty solution to problems. My controlling personality didn't pick up an impending disaster.

"I ordered the home test from *Heritage Plus*. It should be here in three working days. How about you come to my condo next Saturday?"

"Are you sure it's accurate? I'm nervous about what it will show."

"I thought you wanted to know."

"And you trust doing it at home, not in a doctor's office?"

"Yes, Mark. I checked the Yelp reviews. They were mostly favorable. I'll see you Saturday at noon and we'll eat afterwards."

Mark arrived on schedule, carrying a large shoulder bag. Each time I saw Mark I felt a *déjà vu* moment. His smell was reminiscent, and the way his bulky hands were shaped got me caught up with the thought that I knew this man.

“I’ve got stuff to show you. Pictures when I was growing up. My school yearbook from Fairfax High.” Memories of my chamber of horrors at Fairfax filled my head.

“First I should give you a tour.” The living room was uncluttered. A black and white Ansel Adams print was centered over the burnt red couch. No knick knacks on the redwood coffee table. Two lonely brass candle holders sat on the teak table in the dining room. The David Hockney print of a blonde man watching a swimmer in the hills of Hollywood was the only vibrant color. Mark’s frozen smile, ear to ear, pumped me up. The prize of the condo was the second bedroom that housed three hundred original Broadway cast albums, progressive rock, and classic Motown from 1964 to 1970, and walls of books from the first edition of *Interviews with A Vampire* to the canon of books by Pat Conroy and Iris Murdoch. Mark said, “Can I look at the albums? I want to see if you have any garage bands from the 1960s. I love “Time Won’t Let Me” by The Outsiders. And you have every Prince album, too.”

“First, put that bag down and let’s get the test completed. These cotton swabs need to get rubbed on the inside of our cheeks. Then we send this to the lab and they compare the epithelial cells.”

Mark countered with, “I thought it would be a blood test.”

“No, they assured me that the DNA cells in our cheeks would be the same as doing blood samples.”

We perched ourselves on the couch. I went first and used the swab to capture the cells inside my cheek. When Mark repeated the process on himself collecting particles from his cheek, I stared into his eyes, looking for my image reflection. Upon completion, Mark collapsed into my arms. The waterfall of tears dribbled onto my shirt. I hugged him until the tears subsided.

“I’m sorry, Lynn. I didn’t mean to collapse. This is just so emotional being here and having the test. I thought this would only be a shock for you. It seems that it’s a shock to my system, too. I didn’t believe I would ever meet you.”

I remained quiet not wanting to destroy the moment. What could I say anyway without sounding hurtful that without the DNA results we couldn’t assume we were flesh?

We carefully put the swabs in hygienically sealed bags and slipped them into the addressed envelopes. The waiting game for our fate began.

I asked him, “I want to see pictures of you.”

Mark grabbed his satchel and pulled out loose photos. No smiling. He would have been handsome if he smiled. Despite being thin, I could see an appealing eye intensity. A young boy gripping a baseball bat, encouraging a ball to be smacked. The cliché-ridden backward cap topped his curly brown hair. Then a series of pictures of him dribbling a basketball and a wow shot of Mark in midair almost hugging the basketball hoop. Finally, he was older, maybe a senior, and he was wearing a Speedo and just about to dive into a pool. I despised sports, but with my father watching games nightly, I had absorbed snippets of the lingo. Gilbert forced me to watch the boring Olympics. Well at least I could tolerate the gay friendly swimming and skating.

“You are such an athlete. Nothing like me.”

“I loved whacking or gripping balls. It was something I was good at and could release my anger. I was afraid I had a monster inside of me waiting to escape.”

“I’m afraid to ask what you were angry about.”

“Being in a foster home till I was eighteen. I had been promised adoption but there was always a problem at the last minute.”

“I can’t believe in all those years there wasn’t a couple that wanted you. Was there a reason you were never chosen?”

“I was constantly sick from as far back as I can remember. Colds, sore throats, throwing up, stomach aches, and earaches. My foster parents, Ethel and Sam, were taking me to the Emergency Room monthly. Between the fevers spiking at 103, inflamed tonsils, and bouts of strep throat, I was off school for weeks at a time. Then when I outgrew being sickly, I started having anger issues. I failed on so many levels when I was being checked out by potential couples looking to adopt a healthy happy boy.”

“Hard to believe you have a temper. You seemed like a sweet kid.”

“If things didn’t go my way, I would punch holes in my bedroom wall. The foster environment was killing me. I shared a bedroom with Kevin when I was fifteen. He was ten and always pulling pranks. We slept in bunk beds because the bedroom was so tiny. I tried the lower bunk but it made me claustrophobic. On one of those rare Los Angeles humid evenings Kevin started shaking the bed. I hollered, ‘Quit it or I’m coming down and I will make you stop.’ I had a baseball game in the morning and between the restless sleep and Kevin being an asshole, anger started building. When I leaped to step down, I realized Kevin had moved the ladder. I flopped onto the wooden floor with my leg collapsing under me. I was startled before I began screaming in pain. I’ve tried to block out the rest of that summer and fall. With my leg in a cast from toes to hip, I was out of commission. No baseball, football, or basketball. The only sport left was swimming. It saved my life.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I swam, mental and physical pain were gone. I focused on the stroke and forgot about my crummy life.”

“I know about that. My lover Gilbert was a swimmer. Are you still swimming?”

“Yes, I belong to the West Hollywood swim team. It’s mainly gay members but they let me swim as an honorary “breeder.” Breeder was a term of endearment that gay men call heterosexuals since they can have offspring. The same team that Gilbert belonged to. I had lost touch with the team after Gilbert’s death.

Mark had awarded me fond yet painful reminiscences about Gilbert. I told him, “My lover Gilbert was on the team. I used to watch him compete. We went to the Gay Games.”

“Amazing. What a coincidence! Then you know all about how great the guys have been. And this is where I learned about community. I led such a sheltered life at the foster home. We work out three times a week at the WEHO pool. Maybe you would like to come watch me do the butterfly?”

“I would love to.”

“Lynn, I can’t wait to get the results. How about I drop it off at the Post Office.”

“Sure. Do you need money for postage?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine. And you think we’ll know in a month?”

“That’s what they said.”

The embrace goodbye enriched the remainder of the day. I wanted to share the news with Chuck from BKH. Mark had remained a secret for fear that it was all a ruse. Plus, I didn’t want anyone to scare me about this possibly false reality.

After I explained the events Chuck said, “You really are so gullible. You don’t know anything about this character. And you let him in your condo. Are you nuts?”

“Mark is harmless. Anyway, once we get back the DNA, I’ll know for sure. I thought you would be happy for me.

Remember how I wanted to adopt with Gilbert? I'm going to invite him to the temple and when you meet him, you'll see the resemblance."

"This is a bad idea for him to be at temple. How are you going to introduce him? Please wait until the DNA test comes back."

I was back in a funk after Chuck's negativity. I needed Sondheim's world view to lift me.

"Being Alive" from *Company* would be the antidote. My jukebox cd player spit out the lines, "Holding me too close and hurting me too deep," The lyrics took me back to what happened with Gilbert.

At that point writing about Gilbert in my memoirs had been gridlocked but with all the reminiscing I'd been doing since Mark had entered my life, I was no longer obstructed.

CHAPTER 11

The Melbourne Alarmist

Years early vacations with Gilbert revitalized us but by 2009 we needed a major reboot and hoped that Melbourne would work out our relationship strains. Gilbert was not only teaching but the head of the applicant interview committee and my accounting job became a career with out-of-town monthly travel that had taken a toll on our love partnership. A slope of depression had been rattling me. I still hadn't forgiven him for his indecisiveness in September 2008. This was the window of opportunity when same sex couples could marry for the first time in California.

"Gilbert, why can't we get married? Everyone is on the bandwagon. Look, who knows what's going to happen after the election. If Prop Eight passes it won't be legal anymore. This is a great opportunity. Election day is less than two months away."

"I don't know, Lynn. I love you and it would be fun to get married. But it's a big step. I don't want to rush into it just because the clock is ticking. It's not very romantic. It should be our decision and we shouldn't be trying to beat the deadline. Anyway, we are domestic partners."

Of course, my negative projection came through. Prop Eight passed. No more marriages. Gilbert saw my anger. He told me, "Let's get rings. We don't need a piece of paper to prove we love each other. But having a ring will seal us. And going to Melbourne can be a honeymoon."

I insisted we wear the rings on our ring fingers to further solidify our love.

The sixteen-hour nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Australia loomed. Within days we would be traveling to Melbourne for a three-week escapade partially for Gilbert's swimming competition.

The arrival brought us to the Causeway Hotel, our home for the next ten days. The dark alley was an ominous setting for this Melbourne downtown establishment. Opening the door to a hotel room was fraught with suspense. The twin beds plagued me when Gilbert failed to repeat his often-used phrase, "This is no good. We should have a queen bed. Can we ask them to move the beds together?" I rationalized that his fifty-something body needed the energy to handle the two-hundred butterfly. I resigned to sexual abstinence until the competition ended.

After Gilbert's daily departure to the Melbourne Sports Aquatic Center, the day belonged to me. During the next ten days I penetrated each nook and cranny of Melbourne, highlighted by the East Melbourne Synagogue. Squashed between two buildings on Albert Street, this 1857 temple reeked of Jewish history. The calmness when I rang the front doorbell gave me a sinking feeling that it was closed. The quick response from a sweet-faced man made me hopeful.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm visiting and would like to see the temple?"

The door swung open and I was transported to Australian Hebrew roots.

"Would you like to pray?"

"No, I want to look around."

He smiled and led me through the sanctuary.

"I'm the rabbi if you have any questions."

"Is this a thriving congregation?"

"About two hundred families. I've been here about ten years. It's been a struggle getting new members. We're

orthodox but try to be welcoming. Women usually sit in the balcony but we've begun allowing couples to sit in the back of the synagogue."

"I understand. We've got the same type of stagnant membership at our temple. We're stuck at two hundred family units. It's been difficult, the millennials aren't interested in joining organized religion. It's called Beth Kol Hadashim, one of the first LGBT temples in the world that started in 1973."

I looked for a dismissive reaction, knowing the orthodox non-acceptance of the gay and lesbian community. I was rewarded with another smile.

"Ah yes, I've heard of your synagogue. Welcome."

I let the one hundred fifty years seep into my skin as I viewed the arches surrounding the pulpit, wooden benches, and the refreshing English inscriptions on the wall plaques. Comforting icons. I wanted God to covet me. A canopy over Gilbert that he would stay well.

In the evening, we had dinner with teammates Jerome and Andrea at the restaurant- infested Hardware Lane. The crispy salmon at Claypots Barbarossa was sumptuous. Afterwards, Jerome obsessed about finding the best gelato in Melbourne. As we partook in his quest, droplets of rain surprised the night sky. We landed in Pidapipo and taste tested caramel, coconut, and mango before deciding what we'd be slurping. The girls running the establishment shoveled out the gelato from covered steel containers. Because we were approaching the closing witching hour, they needed muscles to scrape the remains of the ice cream frozen in the bottom of the barrels. The town shut down after nine except for the brightly lit Pidapipo which energized the Flinders Street neighborhood. As we dragged our brimming stomachs back to the hotel, Gilbert halted the walk.

Gilbert's hands roamed through his pants pockets and he said, "Where is my wallet?"

“You must have had it to pay for the ice cream.”

“It must have dropped out of my pants. We need to retrace our steps.”

My heart went into alarm mode. The brisk-paced return to Pidapipo allowed anxiety to fully bloom.

Gilbert queried the two young exhausted women running the shop.

“Oh, your friend found your wallet on the stool you were sitting at. He said he’ll give it to you tomorrow morning.”

Gilbert instantly relaxed while I festered. Letting go didn’t come easily to me. The goodwill of the evening was gone. I had a concern that the twice daily dosage of Wellbutrin for the last six years was failing to quiet my brain.

The following day brought the International Gay and Lesbian Aquatics grand finale. Gilbert had pocketed six swimming medals covering butterfly, freestyle, and relays. When we returned to Los Angeles, I had taken a secrecy oath not to reveal that he was competing against swimmers only in the 50-55 age category. We joked that as swimmers aged up, they’d get an award for just getting into the pool!

With the competition over, Gilbert could relax and I wanted to be rewarded with passion. An integral part of the love-making was the use of the lubricant WET. The special qualities of not drying out made it essential.

“Gilbert, I can’t find it. I thought I packed it.”

The WET was missing in action and another alarm bell was activated to cloud the evening.

The remaining Melbourne vacation portion was highlighted by a full-day tour of Phillip Island, the home base for miniature penguins. We were told that penguins maneuvered aquatics easily until they hit land. Because they become uncoordinated out of the ocean, they feared predators. The waddle provided

little protection from attack. They became nocturnal and openly exposed themselves when the sunset. A companion to vampire bats, these cute as a button mammals scurried across the sand to the shelter of burrows.

Our tour placed us on bleachers for viewing the parade. Layers of clothing prevented the brisk windy chill from attacking our bones. Would a pesky cold result? Could Gilbert's immune system handle these weather extremes? As the new moon searched for exposure, our eyes hunted for signs of life.

An impatient plea, "I don't see anything, Gilbert. I'm freezing."

His hands of love pointed, "Don't you see them running?"

Rubbing eyeballs to clarify images tricked me into successful sightings. But fatigue prevented us from counting the number of penguins guaranteed by the tour brochure. On the return bus back to the Causeway Hotel we defrosted and Gilbert was lulled into sleep. The caretaker role with Gilbert fed the rigid control that defined my personality.

Tasmania awaited. We flew from Melbourne to Hobart for our six-night trek where we met the Jump Tour minibus that would transport us through the Best of Tasmania. The fifteen-seat machine bumped and grinded, giving my back an aerobic workout. Chris was our fearless leader driver. Sitting behind him for a minimum vertebrae disruption, we had a perfect view of his premature balding spot visible through his dirty blonde perm. When he turned around to address us, his smile lightened my mood. Chris's melting blue eyes were offset by stretched earlobe holes that had large black posts.

"Our first stop today is Port Arthur. Merry Olde England shipped convicts to this prison camp between 1788 and 1868."

During the first break I asked, "I can't place your accent."

"Originally from Germany but I've been living in Belgium."

Hoping for an answer to the barrage of alarms I'd been experiencing on the vacation forced me to ask, "You seem so relaxed and calm. What's your trick?"

"This is sort of a break from my music producing career. It's a reset while I figure out what I want to do. I've only been doing this tour for the last five months."

The strain of deciphering his soft-spoken explanation through my hearing aids challenged me. Uh oh. My ear was drowning. Had the frost-bitten penguin parade given me a cold and clogged my ears? Compromised hearing had plagued me since childhood, but only recently had I been diagnosed with enough hearing loss to require a hearing aid.

"Gilbert, something is wrong. I can't hear anything out of the left ear."

"Are you sure it isn't the hearing aid?"

Surprisingly when I discharged the aid from my ear, sounds were clearer. I tried swapping in another battery. No improvement. The dead hearing aid was blocking any sounds. No wonder I hadn't heard what Chris was saying unless he was facing me and I could read his lips. Damn. Will those siren bells ever end? One catastrophe after another. Better to put it away for the rest of the trip. On our return to civilization, the first stop would be Costco where I purchased them three years ago.

The next stop was Montezuma Falls. Chris instructed us, "This is the longest hike of the week. About two and a half to three hours each way. I should also warn you that there are a bunch of steps. Be careful not to cross the bridge at the halfway point. It's unstable. Should be blocked off. See you guys later."

Left to fend for ourselves since Chris wouldn't be accompanying us, I had to psych myself to ignore the meniscus tear in my knee and a skipping heartbeat.

The trek began. The ancient rainforest trail was filled with skyscraper high trees. Keeping a slow steady pace helped placate anxiety. Forty-five minutes in and no discomfort. Flurries of nature absorbed us. At the ninety-minute break, a tightness behind my knee sent a message, *Rest Lynn or you'll be in trouble*. The passage had no benches or rocks to perch my butt and a new distress signal belched, *I'd lost track of my partner*. My rearview mirror was deserted. Where was he? Using his iPhone eight camera to capture a memory? Time out provided body refreshment while I waited. A mirage of Gilbert came into view. I loved him even if he drove me crazy.

He gently pushed against my back to revive me.

“Is this helping, Lynn?”

A love smile broke through when we visited the pounding water crashing through rocks that filled up our eyes and ears. We'd arrived at the soaring Montezuma Falls. The power of the cascading water had energized us. Finally, a large sitting rock was available to breathe life into me when I sat. The ache in my knees went into temporary remission as the feeling below my waist returned. A ten-minute break was all we could afford.

I checked my phone for miles and screamed, “It was four miles to get here. Oh, God. How am I going to walk another two hours to get back?” My stomach growled because it was noon.

A jungle of fragmented thoughts flew. Chris wanted us back at two. Shit, another steady hike back without a break. The knee wasn't happy. I had to wield my body to return, ignoring the crippled knee. Focusing on breathing gave a slight respite. Tools to reduce anxiety had dissolved.

I asked, “Is your knee okay, Gilbert?”

“It's fine. Don't worry about me.”

His knee had acted up in the past but his body magically healed with ice and a few stretches. His doctor warned him about a side effect from the cocktail. For my knee it took six months.

I was burrowing my way to the finish line when I saw the mini-bus and Chris. Salvation was there as I scrambled to the bus seat for relief.

Rain was a non-event up until the following day. Chris explained, “So we had plans to spend a chunk of time at the beaches of North Eastern Tasmania. With these 100% thundershowers we’ll abbreviate the tour beach stop and stick with the sheltered Cozy Beach in Bay of Fires. Named by Captain Tobias Furneaux in 1773 when he discovered the bay and saw the fires of Aboriginal people on the beach.”

Gilbert was in withdrawal because he hadn’t been swimming in over a week. He said, “I know it’s storming but I want to swim in the ocean. I mean when else would I get a chance to swim in Tasmania?”

I was speechless when he left the bus with his swim cap, earplugs, goggles, and towel. He had prepared that morning by using his Speedo as underwear for this emergency swim.

I tried to howl, “Please don’t go. You’re crazy.” The intense wind ripped my umbrella to shreds as I followed Gilbert. The sideways rain was soaking my mom’s long blue nylon jacket. This one remaining piece of clothing that I’d saved for twenty years. It was a good omen on the trip. Despite warnings of hot and humid weather before we left, cold temperatures were blasting from the get-go. Mom was protecting me.

Trees barely shielded the cove. Gilbert defiantly approached the thrashing waves against rocks jutting on both sides of the beach area. The chilling winds and rain refused to stop as Gilbert removed his pants to reveal his red Speedo. I was gasping as I witnessed his tentative walk from the sand towards the treacherous ocean. *Does he have a suicide wish? He thinks*

he's invincible because the AIDS virus hasn't killed him. I swear he's going to die or like his friend, Ben, be left paralyzed. Ben from Gilbert's swim team had been hit by a Hawaiian wave last year. Gilbert had a special connection with Ben because they'd joined the team on the same day. But now I couldn't take it. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

With water splashing against my face, I couldn't tell if I was crying. I hated this. Not being able to watch so edging back to the bus was the only option. Clanging alarms began punching. My thick crew socks were soggy. Clothes were water drenched. I remember the comment Australians often repeated, "Don't bother reading the weather reports. You'll experience all four of the seasons each day." Don't let my sinuses hear that or they'll be out protesting.

Ten minutes passed and Gilbert returned with that damn smile. I couldn't reciprocate even when the bus erupted in applause. The large red towel he carried tried to stop the shivering. A good method to get pneumonia. Why was he challenging his compromised immune system? I pouted until he sat beside me. He pulled out a pouch from his backpack and withdrew shiny silver. He handed it to me, allowing me to slip it on his ring finger. I had to grin knowing he took the precaution of keeping the ring safe from the violent ocean. I was still mad but I loved him.

The final day of the tour with Chris took us to the Freycinet National Park hike. Gilbert was game but with my knees rejecting another hike, I was left to roam the flat surfaced Honeymoon Bay. Blessed with a sunny but chilly day, this bay within a bay grabbed my attention. I asked a woman surveying the Bay, "Any ideas as to why this is called Honeymoon Bay?"

"There are weddings performed here. My son is getting married tomorrow so we're checking out the area."

"Wow. And will the bride wear a white dress in this weather?"

“No. My son is marrying my soon-to-be incredible son-in-law. We’re originally from Chile but have lived in Melbourne for the last thirty-five years. We’re having a small wedding officiated by a priest and then a party in the Freycinet Lodge. Their friends have flown here from all over the world.”

“Congratulations.” The mystery about the name was solved. This sweet coincidence settled me during my honeymoon without a wedding. I had been suppressing my love for Gilbert during the vacation because I didn’t want to get hurt if he got sick. There were no restraints of my anxiety until Honeymoon Bay. The suppressed anger at Gilbert about the botched wedding plans had been spirited away. I acknowledged my control freak personality that must have been making Gilbert bonkers. I wished I could use Vaseline to make alarms slide off my back. I craved having Gilbert with me at Honeymoon Bay.

Thank goodness we were flying home after Tasmania. The past nineteen days had been a roller coaster. I wanted to return to normal. I wanted to rid myself of those alarm bells. I fretted about the Wellbutrin that no longer worked. My brain had become acclimated to the Wellbutrin but without a psychiatrist I had to rely on my primary care doctor to either increase the dosage or change medications. The return to the routine temporarily alleviated my symptoms.

CHAPTER 12

Gilbert and Lynn's Anniversary

On Bastille Day 2010 we decided to have a tenth-anniversary party. We invited over one hundred friends. The King's Road Park would be shut down for our private event. Whole Foods was catering the affair. The rabbi would attend and we hired the cantor from temple BKH to perform. My good friend Tessie from work was a wiz with decorations and created an Academy Award theme. We would make a grand entrance and march in on a long red carpet while the cantor sang "For Good" from the musical *Wicked* that told the backstory of the witches in *The Wizard of Oz*. The message about being changed by a lover, friend or relative resonated with both of us. We made delicious love the night before the bash. I worked on a short speech about Gilbert.

Tessie was my ageless Filipino confidant. No secrets. When I told her, "Gilbert got diagnosed with AIDS but you don't have to worry about me, I'm fine. And Gilbert will be okay as long as he goes to the doctor regularly and takes his cocktail," the look on her eyes scraped away fears that were gnawing at me during the last six years. She initiated the idea of the celebration.

"It's been ten years. You must make a big shebang. I'll help you."

Then Tessie threw me into a tizzy when she questioned me about parents, "Lynn, you never talk about your father. And what about Gilbert? Doesn't he have family?"

“Gilbert’s family is all on the east coast. I don’t want my father there.”

The humid morning woke me earlier than Gilbert. Our tuxedos were hanging on the clothes stand in front of the open window looking out at Kings Road Park. Heavy sleeper Gilbert was beautifully still. I nudged him and said, “Hey baby. Today is our big day. There are a few final touches like getting the flowers, putting out placeholders on the tables and arranging the centerpieces. Tessie is bringing those and she got us a guest book for our friends to sign in. I know it’s corny to have people write testimonials about how much they love us. Anyway, I want to get breakfast out of the way.” I kept rambling and there still was no response from Gilbert. He must have been in a deep sleep. But when I shook him again, he was so rigid. Oh God, he wasn’t breathing. No, no, no.

When the ambulance paramedics arrived, they told me he was dead. I kept slapping myself to wake up. When the palm hit my cheek, I tasted blood. Rather than spit it out, I swallowed the blood, letting it burn holes into my esophagus. Gilbert was fine before we shut the lights last night and drowned ourselves in the afterglow of making love.

“Did you want us to take him to the hospital or we can pronounce him dead?”

I couldn’t answer them. My brain took flight. I wanted a puppet master to get me to walk away from this nightmare. I whispered, *this is a hallucination* until strings began moving my mouth, “Don’t ask me that. Contact Chuck at 323-688-7889 and let him decide.” Chuck had power of attorney and was our executor for the trust and medical directives. It made more sense to let someone levelheaded that we trusted to handle this stuff. Gilbert and I didn’t want the responsibility.

I regretted all those false alarms I experienced in Melbourne with Gilbert. Our last trip, and I sabotaged the vacation with worry.

The doctor showed the cause of death was a heart attack. Chuck thought that the AIDS virus was making him vulnerable and the side effects of the cocktail could have been the culprit. I was the merry widow at forty. Why wasn't I infected? Two HIV tests that were negative. And I had been exposed to two AIDS carriers... Gilbert, and the prostitute. I wanted to think that my angel Mom was protecting me, but the angel couldn't protect me from another abandonment.

The unrelenting grief turned me into an extreme Mrs. Havisham from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. She was a reclusive wealthy spinster who was jilted at the altar and wore her wedding dress for the remainder of her life.

I wouldn't leave the condo and never answered the phone. I kept wearing the anniversary tuxedo, wanting to enjoy each moment of mourning. I refused to see Dr. Stillman, my psychologist. The constipated emotions attached to Mom's death more than twenty years ago flooded me when I processed the mourning of Gilbert.

Each morning I continued to make breakfast for myself and Gilbert.

Gilbert, do you want some more coffee? Jonah Goldberg has this great op-ed piece in the L.A. times today. I know he's conservative but he's Jewish and it makes me understand what the right wing is thinking. Thank you for telling me to read the book Cut by Patricia McCormick. So sad about how Callie kept cutting herself to distract from his painful life. Gilbert, why didn't we adopt? I have nothing of you now. Oh yes, I have memories and your love but I wanted an extension. Something real.

If only I could use a knife like the character Callie in the novel, *Cut*, to slice away the throbbing grief. When I tired of wallowing after two months, I decided to emerge from my private coffin. I would walk through life like a zombie, emotionless, pretending I was alive. I resumed sessions with

Dr. Stillman but I lied when I said, “Oh I am doing so much better. I’ve gone through the six stages of grief. I’m Dolly Levi from *Hello Dolly* ready to rejoin the human race.” No, it took almost nine years to recover. But now Mark had coerced himself into my life. I wanted to let myself be rejuvenated if only I could believe his farfetched story. Do I tell him about the prostitute? I needed proof. I wish Tessie was still alive. She would know what I should do. Shortly after I retired Tessie complained about a constant stomachache. Her weight loss reminded me of Mom’s illness. Tessie told me, “Well, the one good thing about being sick is that I can fit into my clothes. I don’t have to worry about my weight anymore.” She died of stomach cancer. Another desertion.

CHAPTER 13

Jack the Beast Rises

I muttered *Oh no* when I looked at my iPhone. The screen number was the Country Home nursing home on Fairfax. What had Dad done now?

“Your father got into a fight with another resident. If this doesn’t stop, you’ll need to move him. And if he doesn’t stop drinking, we’ll be forced to evict Jack.”

He’d previously gotten a citation for smoking in his room. Now, I needed to play a parent role again. A brisk rumbling walk would be required to get there.

The daily walk of 7,500 steps on the tree-lined Kings Road kept me sane. My happiness refused to die as I strolled and daydreamed about introducing Mark as my son at temple.

I had fantasized that when Dad moved to Country Home two years ago that my servitude would end. I would be detoxed from the poisons eating at me after monthly checkups on the beast. Thank goodness, he was never resistant to moving. He told me, “I have no assets and no money. This place takes Medi-Cal. I get food and lodging for free. There’s a van to take me to Beverly Hospital. You just give me money for this thing they call incidentals. I guess that’s cigarettes and booze.”

Sure, Dad. You’ve got it all figured out. Still kicking at seventy-two.

When you combined his emphysema diagnosis, heart disease, Parkinson’s, alcoholism, and a broken hip, he was incapable of living alone. I worked with Dennis, a temple member who was a big honcho with Country Home, and set in motion a plan to get my father placed. I was no longer obeying

my mom's wishes of care-taking, Daddy wouldn't cohabitiate with me.

When I entered Country Home, the greeting generated a smile. The guard said, "That was quick, Mr. Pinchas." The walls and floor were drenched with a bleach odor. Thankfully two months had passed since my last painful visit.

I heard snoring before encountering his cubicle. Dad slept while the rattling television hummed at high decibels from football, baseball, or basketball games. I was clueless when it came to sports. I didn't know how Dad's roommate Jim put up with him. Where was Jim? His bed was naked. Dad's mouth was open with a pig chortling sound escaping.

The cubbyhole was devoid of personality. Dad didn't bring any mementos from the apartment I grew up in. He'd inhabited that dysfunctional chamber for over forty years. Before he closed up, he'd arranged to clean the apartment. On moving day, I asked him, "Aren't you taking any pictures with you? Don't you want to make your new place homey?"

"No. I got rid of everything. It doesn't mean a damn."

"Yes, just like you dumped Mom's clothes and sold her jewelry after she died. I only have her blue nylon jacket to remember her by."

"I wanted to forget about your mother. She was dead. I had to move on."

During the final walkthrough before we returned keys to the landlord, I found an ornate gold framed photo. Mom wore her peasant skirt, Dad sported a blazer, and my dark green suit along with turquoise tie finished the family portrait. The picture left me gasping for tears when I realized it hadn't been demolished. The snapshot pretended to represent the last full measure of family happiness. The photograph taken in the sweet spot in the Pan Pacific Park was an oasis near our

impoverished apartment. It had been photographed after the dreaded bar mitzvah day, my unlucky thirteenth birthday.

Studying for the bar mitzvah caused a rift between Dolores and Jack. “I have this friend at work that knows Hebrew and he said he would tutor Lynn for nothing. I just have to help with painting his house.”

“But Jack, doesn’t Lynn have to go to Hebrew school? Chabad House requires that.”

“Don’t worry about that, Dolores. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Jack, it’s important to me for Lynn to attend Hebrew School. And what are my girlfriends in Sisterhood going to say?”

“I don’t give a shit about them. This is my decision. I’m sick of you coddling him. I’m not spending any extra money.” Mom was incapable of standing up to Jack.

The first meeting with the tutor was disastrous. Isadore Cohen was an Orthodox Jew with a grey beard reaching his chest and squiggly *payot* strutting from his sideburns. He explained the *payot* was an edict from the Bible that the hair on the sides of your head shouldn’t be cut, thus the reason for his curly sideburns. His apartment on Melrose and Flores was a hoarder’s heaven with piles of Israeli newspapers and Jewish Journals making it treacherous to walk from the entrance to his study. My tone deafness made learning the *Haftorah* impossible. And learning Hebrew phonetically was difficult. He kept saying, “Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. No, no. Listen to me. Notice how my voice modulates. Just copy that.” I was brain-dead after each weekly session. The final humiliation was meeting with Cantor Friedman a week before the bar mitzvah to ensure I was on tap to perform. He dismissed me when I couldn’t stay in tune.

When the D-day crept up my voice was hoarse from practicing the words and melody.

“I can’t sing and it hurts when I talk. I don’t want to have a bar mitzvah.”

Dad spit, “What? After all the trouble we’ve gone through. And I paid for your mother to get a new dress. I had to give a special donation to the temple.”

“What if I can’t speak or sing?”

Mom asked me to open my mouth.

“Lynn, stick your tongue out so I can see down your throat. It looks fine to me. Nothing red or irritated.”

“It hurts, Mom.”

“Gargle with salt water and save your voice. I am so proud of you for becoming a man. It’s such an honor.”

“Listen to your mother, Lynn. Make us proud. Look, I was nervous before mine and nearly fainted because I forgot to eat on the morning of my bar mitzvah. And what is wrong with your fingernails? They are so long. They look like a girl’s hands.”

“I know, Dad, and my toenails need cutting, too. Can you do it for me?”

I had never learned the art of using a nail clipper. This had become a monthly ritual with Jack and the source of this routine started with our finch, Domino. The finch was a tenth birthday gift from Mom. We loved having a pet bird but when we needed to clean his cage or let Domino grasp our digits, the claws ate into our fingers. Jack would trim Domino’s nails to eliminate the dilemma. Domino’s voice awakened me and tweeted goodbye when I left the apartment each day for school. The long, jumbled warbling songs brought solace after the daily bludgeoning at Gardner Grade School when I returned. The reassuring finch songs made school tolerable until an

abrupt silence visited me on the last weekend of August before the onset of sixth grade. Witnessing the barren cage brought a waterfall of tears thinking about the worst fate for Domino. In the evening Dad told me that he was changing the cage and Domino flew away. The news riveted me to the bedroom where I crawled under the covers. I wished for a sweet dream about Domino returning home, but during the night, disturbing shouting was resonating from the living room.

“Jack, what really happened to Domino?”

“I was clipping Domino’s nails and the clipper slipped, cutting him in half.”

“Oh my God. Where is he now?”

“I threw him away in the garbage outside.”

“No, you didn’t. I can’t believe you did that. You didn’t think Lynn would want to have a burial for Domino? He loved that bird.”

Jack said, “It’s just a bird, for God’s sake.”

I was deadened. Despite this despicable act, I let Jack cut my nails. Penance for his crime. Both toenails and fingernails were his responsibility. He smiled at my request and walked to the bathroom to get the equipment. He used a pale with lukewarm water and soap to soften the toenails. How could a coarse man be that tender with my feet? He caressed each toe and massaged the ball of my feet. His normally rough hands glided up and down my arch. Jogging at school caused my feet to ache. The massage worked on the cracked soles and a blister that had formed on the right big toe. Finally, Dad’s massage preparation enabled the tips of the toenails to easily be extracted by the clipper.

“Stop, Daddy. It tickles.”

After he used a white towel to pad dry the feet, he sprinkled talcum powder for the finishing touches combined with a gentle slap on the rump signaling we were done.

On the morning of the bar mitzvah, I complained of a fever after throwing up breakfast that Dad had insisted I eat. I hugged the toilet bowl between heaving up the oatmeal and banana.

“Lynn, you need to shower and get dressed. We are leaving in thirty minutes.”

“I’m sick. Get Mom.”

Mom entered the bathroom.

“What’s wrong, honey?”

“I’m sweating, burning up.”

“Here, let me feel your head.” The smooth fingers of Mom’s small hands were cold as they swept across my forehead. “Just a little warm, Lynn. You’ll feel better after you shower. I didn’t want to tell you until after the ceremony that I have a gift for you. I got tickets to see *Dreamgirls* at the Schubert.”

“Oh, Mom. Really. I love Diana Ross and The Supremes. This is their story.”

“Now get ready so you don’t miss your big day. You won’t be my little boy anymore. You are on your way to adulthood.”

I kept singing the songs from *Dreamgirls* when I showered... “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going”, “I Am Changing”, and “One Night Only.”

At temple the rabbi pulled Dad aside, “The cantor is sick so I’ll need to do double duty even though I haven’t worked with Lynn before. Lynn, are you ready? I know you met with Cantor Friedman one time and Friedman said you were an excellent student.”

I gulped and swayed before Dad caught me.

The temple was a storefront room stacked with metal chairs. The lonely blue velvet covered Torah situated in the ark was the only color contrasting with the bland beige walls and floor. A small turnout from Mom's Hadassah group made up the congregation.

Dad said, "Rabbi, Lynn had a bit of a stomach ache this morning but he'll be fine. He's been rehearsing for months."

Before I could blink the service was completed and etched out of my brain. To finish the horrendous day, the bar mitzvah luncheon took place at the Barking Dog.

Dad insisted we celebrate my attainment of manhood at his favorite haunt the Barking Dog. The iconic restaurant bar on Wilshire Boulevard was Dad's neighborhood bar within blocks of our apartment. Jack could be drunk and walk home without murdering a pedestrian if he'd driven. I used to love going to the Barking Dog witnessing the waitresses dressed in long frilly red dresses. The walls were filled with sombreros and every painting had a cactus. But my favorite part was when Margie circulated the restaurant with a large pitcher of water, wearing a headdress filled with plastic fruit. She routinely came to our table and addressed me, "How is Mr. Lynn today? I bet you have a big appetite. I'll tell the chef to give you extra tortillas and make a special flan for you."

The Barking Dog was the only time the three of us went out to eat. Dad loved the humongous margaritas with an abundance of salt around the glass rim. He easily consumed three of them. Drinking mellowed him and manufactured an engaging Jack. He asked, "So Lynn, you are such a good student. All A's on your report card. I was lucky if I got a C. It's nice to have a smart son."

I was leery of his admiration, wondering when he would turn toxic.

After dinner Dad stopped in the bar area to say hello to his drinking buddies. Dad's routine was to begin his drinking spree

in the late afternoon before he faced Dolores' bland cooking creations. He considered his daily visits a sacred time for himself.

A month before my bar mitzvah, Mom was cooking dinner and sliced her finger. She told me, "Lynn, this cut is so deep and I can't stop the bleeding. Get your father. I need to go to the Emergency Room for stitches." Blood was dripping on the counter about to drop to the linoleum floor.

I'd never been to the Barking Dog without Mom and I feared meeting his friends alone. A tomb of smoke and the dimly lit space frightened me, but I needed to get help for Mom. The boisterous laughing eased my fears when I barged in to get Dad.

"Dad, Mom hurt herself. She's bleeding and needs to go to the hospital."

"Tell her I'll be home later. It can't be that bad. Just tell her to use hydrogen peroxide to clean the wound and get some sort of bandage to stop the bleeding."

"She is in so much pain and there is blood on the floor. Please come home."

"Oh, shit, Lynn. You and your mom are a real killjoy." He grabbed my hand and we took off. Dad was reeking of cigarette smoke and his breath had a rancid odor from the alcohol.

Mom wasn't in the kitchen when we arrived. Raw chicken was sitting on the counter. Dad shouted, "Where are you, Dolores?" The bathroom door was closed and Dad asked, "Are you alright, Dolores? Lynn said you sliced your finger." I heard no response until Mom said, "I'm fine, Jack. It stopped bleeding. Just looking for the right size bandage."

"Oh crap. I'm going back. Don't expect me home until midnight." The door slammed and I scared myself when I asked Mom, "Why do you stay with him? I can see you don't love him and he hates me."

She stared at the bathroom mirror wincing as she tried to bandage her hand. The sink counter had blood stains. Mom was a non-responsive shell peering into the mirror. What was she looking at or looking for?

Thus, having lunch at the Barking Dog with the beast sealed my bar mitzvah day revulsion.

CHAPTER 14

Country Home Visit

I didn't wake my father. The beast had dissolved into an anonymous entity when he slept. I missed his viciousness. It had given me something to hate. His infantile anger and stubbornness had corrupted our relationship. Still, of all his characteristics, I wished I inherited his full head of hair at seventy-two. But when I looked at my creeping receding hairline, it added to my list of feeling like an alien son. And my thin body type didn't match his muscular build. I nudged him awake and muted the television.

“Who are you?”

“It's your son, Lynn.” He loved making me think he had dementia.

“Oh yeah. I'd forgotten about you. Never visiting your old man. What brings you to my prison?” He threw his burlap blanket off and lifted himself onto the nearby orange plastic chair exposing his underwear. The chair scraped against the wall chipping off the white enamel paint.

“Put on some clothes, Dad.” Jack ignored me when I continued, “The director said you got into a fight and they want to evict you. And you can't smoke in your room. Just go outside if you want to kill yourself.”

“This asshole sneezed without covering his mouth. I screamed at him, ‘Use a fuckn' tissue.’ He got up from his chair and was about to punch me. I pushed his chair against him.”

“If this is really true then get help from the staff.”

“Did you bring me cigarettes?” he pleaded.

“You have emphysema. I’m not going to help you kill yourself.”

He started laughing and said, “Oh, how sweet. You don’t want to see me die.”

“I need to ask you about the time we went to that prostitute when I was eighteen.”

“What a waste of money. You still ended up queer. I should have gotten a refund from that whore.” He kept rubbing his twitchy hands together praying for a wish or not knowing what to do with his hands because there wasn’t a cigarette attached to them.

“She had a son and he showed up at my condo saying I am his father. It’s impossible. I don’t remember ever really having sex with her. I was out of control, nervous. I could hardly do anything.”

Dad’s droopy eyes widened, “Does that mean I have a grandson?”

I snapped back, “Sure. The three of us can be a happy family. Celebrate Thanksgiving together. Mark will be thrilled to meet his grandfather.” If Mark was my offspring, I would tell him my father was dead.

“Stop making fun of me, Lynn. I want to meet this person.”

“I think it’s a hoax. Anyway, we’re going to have our DNA tested and it will prove I’m not his father.”

He grunted and put the volume on the television back to a screeching level until I grabbed the device and muted it.

“Dad, did you ever love Mom?”

“What does that have to do with this? Of course, I loved her. I rescued your mother from the Bronx. Her parents were destitute and when they found out I had a job they pulled me aside and said, ‘We know Dolores is plain. She’s not going to

get any better looking. We want you to marry her. She'll make a good wife. We know she's older than you.'

"So, it was an arranged marriage?" I asked.

"Yes and no. Your mom had an innocent charm about her. Those big eyes, too big for her face, but they lit up the room. And she knew I was the best she was going to get. She was keeping secrets from her parents."

"What do you mean by secrets?"

"Didn't your mom talk to you before she died?"

"Yes. We had a long talk. I kissed her goodbye and told her I loved her. What didn't she tell me?"

Dad's lacerating cough brought moisture to his eyes and he croaked, "Never mind. Maybe she didn't want you to know."

"What are you keeping from me?"

"I'm not telling you, Lynn. Your mom would have talked to you before she died."

I was infuriated with him and hammered, "I never saw you guys ever show any affection. Not even a kiss."

"Oh, your mother was a cold fish. I tried so hard to at least hold her hand. She bristled when I touched her. It's amazing we had you."

"Did you do anything wrong? I know she complained about your smoking and drinking but she must have known about that before she married you."

He slammed his hand on the end table and shouted, "I was a good husband and provider. I never raised my voice. Never hit her."

"Why did you stay in this shitty apartment? I was embarrassed to have anyone over."

“I wanted to move. She said no. She liked the neighborhood. Being near Fairfax and her friends from temple. She was a big *macher* at the Sisterhood Chadash House in West Hollywood.”

“Did you ever cheat?

“No, even though I wanted to.” He descended into sleep.

I wished I could feel sorry for him. He must be covering up. And he changed the subject when I asked about this mysterious secret. And why did she ask me to never tell Dad about being gay? It was a cruel request.

And what other secrets did she not reveal to me? I wondered about my birthday in August 1970 and their marriage in January of the same year. Mom must have been pregnant when they married or I was premature.

I left the room without saying goodbye. Jack, the beast was a poor excuse for a father or human being. I couldn’t accept the cliché that he did the best he could. But finding out that he loved mom gave me the satisfaction that Jack was a decent husband.

CHAPTER 15

Blog Poem

During my retirement I decided to start a blog and post a poem of the week:

We survived bullying at Fairfax Highschool

We watched our mothers die

We came out at the Gay and Lesbian Center

We were afraid to tell our alcoholic fathers we were gay

We let our father take us to a prostitute to convert us

We danced until we lost our hearing at Studio One

We met men at the Pussycat theater when it was gay

We put ads in Frontiers and met young hot boys

We didn't have anal intercourse

We stopped dating when AIDS was blowing up the community

We started going to memorial services

We watched our lovers get an AIDS diagnosis

We attended APLA and Shanti support groups

We watched our lovers and friends die

We worried about turning positive from negative

We were scared about getting full blown AIDS

We started going to the gay and lesbian temple

We thought we were agnostic atheists

We found religion

We had panic attacks and had to take anti-depressants

We retired

We rewrote our story

This is how we got here

CHAPTER 16

The Religious Debut

Despite Chuck's protestation, I decided to invite Mark to temple on the night I was giving the sermon or the more official Jewish word, *drash*. A marvel that Mark could be there and understand my devotion to Judaism and God. When I approached Mark about attending services, he seemed hesitant until I told him, "You know the comradery with the other swimmers, that's the way I feel when I enter the sanctuary. It will be good for you. Give it a chance. Services are at eight Friday nights. I am doing the sermon part."

"I don't have a religion. I'm afraid I'll feel awkward with a bunch of men and women praying. Can I just meet you there? That way I'll have options as to when I want to go. You won't want to leave. It's your congregation and your big night."

Nervous energy was exploding a few hours before we met at the entrance of BKH. Mark wore a grey suit with a black abstract designed tie. I wished I'd warned him about how informally dressed the congregation was going to be. 501 Levi jeans and cargo pants were commonplace for the men. The women had a business casual look.

"I forgot to tell you that you don't need to dress up."

"I like to make a good impression. Plus, I never get a chance to wear a suit except when I meet you."

The foyer to the temple touted a series of stained glass windows conceptually depicting the departure of the Jews from Egypt. The refurbished building boasted being fully green. Each time I entered, my shaky faith searched for renewal.

Bill Fox greeted us with, "*Shabbat Shalom*. Who did you bring, Lynn?"

“This is my friend Mark.”

“Mark, why don’t you fill out the guest list. Who knows, you may enjoy tonight and want to join?”

Bill was pulling at his closely cropped beard and I could see him salivating while he checked out Mark. How could I have forgotten the allure of a novel face like Mark’s? I should have warned Bill that Mark was straight and out of bounds.

I pulled two *siddur* prayer books from the wooden shelf before we entered the sanctuary. The image of the Torah scrolls in the ark crafted a reflection on my Jewish ancestry. The velvety burnt red design blanketed the scrolls. For thousands of years, Jews have been praying facing the ark. Now God had brought me a son. An extension of my soul. My atoms would linger through Mark.

At the midway point of the service, I heard the announcement, “Tonight is special. We have one of our treasured members, Lynn Pinchas, who will be doing the *drash* tonight.”

I gathered my speech. My focus was on Mark when I began.

Before I begin, I want to dedicate this to the memory of my lover Gilbert. I met him almost twenty years ago when he was on the bimah and was going to be a bar mitzvah boy at forty-three.

Do you believe in God? Can you imagine if that was the first question you were asked when you came through the doors of BKH? What if the membership application included this question.? I know this is a very personal area that I’m exploring. I want to take you on a journey about faith. We’ll look at our beliefs or non-beliefs. Who knows—this might be the type of sermon that Billy Graham or Katherine Kulman would give if they were Jewish?

The dictionary uses the following language to define God—a being conceived as the perfect originator and ruler of the

universe, the principal object of faith and worship in monotheistic religions. The force—an allusion to Star Wars, effect or manifestation or aspect of being. The single supreme agency postulated in some philosophical systems to explain the phenomena of the world, having a nature variously conceived in such terms as prime mover, an immanent vital force or infinity. You can count on the dictionary to come up with such an antiseptic definition of God. Our context of God tonight is much different.

One of my incentives for coming to Friday night services is to reaffirm my belief in God. The sense of community along with a public and private declaration of my belief in God helps give me an anchor for the coming week. I think it's vital that we re-evaluate the reasons we come to BKH. Belief in God is a difficult and controversial subject. We're afraid to talk about God for fear of losing some atheists. It seems that speaking about God reminds us of television evangelists and preachers. Many Christians tend to use God and the Bible as support for homophobia. For Gay Jews, whether congregants believe in God or not isn't a prerequisite. For many of us, talking about God pushes buttons. God is thought of like a parent that you want to rebel against. Even though it is expressly forbidden to make people into Gods, many times instead of worshiping or having faith in a higher being, we start a relationship with someone who we put on a pedestal—who becomes a God to us. Unfortunately, this type of worship leads to disaster because no one can live up to a Godlike image. We talk about doctors acting like God because it seems to us they are controlling life/death and can be miracle makers.

Now you'll ask about the horrors and nightmares that the world produces daily. Throughout history events happen that we find bewildering. We ask the questions—how could there be a God and let this happen—the Holocaust, dropping an atomic bomb, babies dying and 9-11, You look

at me and question why my lover Gilbert died of the side effects of AIDS on the day of our tenth anniversary or why my mom died shortly before I turned eighteen. I don't look to God for answers. My life has been fraught with danger. From the time I started attending school I was made fun of for being effeminate, walking like a girl, and being poor at sports. I was called a sissy, faggot, queer, and girlie. I was ashamed of who I was. I'm not going to tell you that God subjected me to this cruelty to make me stronger. I can't proclaim that I was protected by God because I've never come close to death from being gay-bashed. I wouldn't pretend to explain that God is responsible for me testing negative for HIV despite having been with my beloved Gilbert for ten years.

Judaism can be a culture rather than a religion. Here at BKH, culture and religion are both encouraged equally. Stepping through these doors on a Friday night does not come with any conditions. There is no assumption that we all have the same degree of faith. Just like being Jewish doesn't mean that it is required for you to come to services to pray. Being agnostic or atheist doesn't exclude a person from attending services or becoming a member. A sense of belonging and community in a spiritual environment is what BKH is all about. If you took a survey of the upper intelligentsia, you might suspect that a higher percentage would be atheist. Yet Albert Einstein had a profound belief in God disputing the myth that God is a concept only the non-intellectual can easily grasp. God can be an idea, an inkling that there is a purpose and order to our day-to-day existence. I hope that I've initiated a new beginning for those of you who want God to be a more significant and compelling part of your life.

The flushed joy of communicating with the congregants overwhelmed me. I almost cried as the daggers of love shot at me from Mark's smile. Mark jumped out of his seat and burst

into tears when he wrapped his arms around me. The sanctuary dissolved. Father and son were connecting.

The spell was broken as congratulations began bombarding me.

“Wow. I can’t believe that was the first time you gave a sermon. Good work, Lynn.”

“I loved it. Very thought provoking. You have such an astonishing voice.”

The beaming pride of showing Mark off to my friends topped off the evening. Mark told me, “You really made me into a believer. I want to call you Dad but I know it’s too soon.” No, it wasn’t too soon for me to pledge to be his father, unlike the relationship rampage between Jack and myself.

CHAPTER 17

Marching with Mark

The humbling combined with Mark's reaction had my brain in freefall joy as I rehashed the evening of my theologian debut. Behind the scenes I began feeling fraudulent about the sermon. That despite my proselytizing about God and how to live your life, I didn't believe the words. The struggle to stop the flow of negativity was excruciating.

Just as exhaustion brought me to the brink of early morning slumber, Mark's number blinked on my iPhone through my crusty eyes.

"Thank you again for last night. Guess what? I got us rush tickets to *Falsettos* at the Ahmanson. Didn't you tell me that I should see that show?"

This would be the fifth time seeing the musical, a rare feat of a theater piece worth repeated viewings. The integration of presenting the two one-act musicals, *March of the Falsettos* with *Falsetto Land* produced an orgasmic feast of music and lyrics.

My hoarse voice spoke into the iPhone, "What time is it, Mark?

"Oh, no. I woke you up. I was so excited that I got these tenth-row orchestra seats even if the tickets say *limited view* because they are on the extreme side."

"Why do I deserve such a treat?"

"After what you did for me at services."

Mark scooped me up Saturday night on time at five thirty giving us enough time for dinner before the 8 p.m. curtain. The high-end restaurant Patina had just opened an outdoor venue

by the Ahmanson Theater called Cocina Roja. We grabbed three taco plates with Chicken Adobo and Wild Mushroom.

Mark asked, “Did you want to share a Corona?”

“Sure. It will go perfectly with the corn tortilla tacos.” The risk of wheat in the Corona was worth the relaxation factor. I hated being on a gluten-free diet but at least I knew that my gut spasms weren’t all in my head.

“I hope this is okay. I didn’t know if you were expecting something fancier.”

“No, this is a beautiful night to eat outside.”

“So, you said you are retired. Fifty seems so young. What do you do all day?”

“I take classes at the LGBT village. Besides my writing I’m involved with temple. I help out with membership.”

Mark asked, “This Corona is so refreshing that I’m going to get another bottle. Did you want anymore?”

“If I drink anymore, I’ll fall asleep during the show.”

When Mark returned, he asked, “You don’t miss working?”

“No. I did my time. I had to learn to love accounting until the job turned into a career. You know I tried standup comedy. They offered this six-week class with Caitlin at the Village. We had a showcase and I got laughs too! I love performing.”

“I’m not surprised after hearing you speak at your synagogue. You have a talent. I bet you could have been a DJ with your voice.”

I blushed from the barrage of compliments from Mark. Only recently had my hated voice turned into a powerful asset.

At 7:45 p.m. we checked into the theater. While we sat, I thought about the cast album that I’d played a hundred times during the last twenty years. Now watching it with Mark took

the story about gay father Marvin and son Jason to skyscraping cottons of clouds.

The first act ended with Marvin's lament to his son. Marvin sang about loving him and talking to him face to face.

Mark remained frozen in the theater seat. Unable to clap. When he looked at me with purity, I melted.

And when Marvin's lover, Whizzer, died of AIDS, I tried unsuccessfully to prevent myself from wailing. I hadn't seen the show since Gilbert's death. An unhealed scab was waiting to be ripped off. Mark recognized my distress and put his arm around me.

The walk back to Mark's car was consumed with my praise, "Seeing it with you was like I'd never seen the show before. Thank you for this."

"No. Don't thank me. Sharing this with you was a revelation. You know whatever happens with the test, I am glad we met. You didn't shut me out. It means a lot to me, Lynn."

With the chilled air wrapping around my bones, Mark snuggled to warm me. This was nothing like being with Gilbert or how I felt with Ethan. Mark was a piece of me. A history. A connection. An unconditional intimacy.

The month crawled with a frustrated anticipation of the DNA outcome. Instructions said our data would be reflected on the site. After thirty days I logged in and was bombarded with blankness. Now, Mark had disappeared. No texts or emails and he'd been non-responsive when I telephoned him. And then I was bulleted through with the thought that Mark never mailed the envelope. I called the help number.

"The DNA test was mailed over a month ago. It's for Lynn Pinchas. Do you have a record of receiving it?"

“Can we get back to you? We’re backlogged and it will be difficult to tell whether we received the sample. Give us twenty-four hours and we’ll call you back at this number you’re calling from. Can I help you with anything else, sir?”

“No. Goodbye.” Damn. I was tired of waiting and obsessing about Mark. Why wasn’t he returning my calls? His eerie quietness blessed and cursed me. I needed to stop this self-absorbed preoccupation with Mark. King’s Road Park whispered and sucked me out of my thoughts. I hadn’t inhabited the oasis since the initial meeting with Mark. I was afraid that Gilbert was haunting the terrain. Upon my approach I noticed white batons flying into the air. The man throwing the batons was engulfed in the exercise. I became fascinated with his self-control. He smiled as I came closer to view his performance. The batons danced from arm to arm and hand to hand. I became hypnotized. He was an outlier for the neighborhood. This chubby man didn’t fall into the categories that defined West Hollywood: senior, gay, straight millennials, or Russian. No leashed dog or child made him an anomaly. His jumping and full mop of brown hair startled me.

“Are you rehearsing for a show?”

“Yes. I juggled when I was a teenager and stopped in my twenties. Just getting back into the groove of juggling so I can add it to my magic act” His dirty brown tee-shirt was soaked with sweat. He stretched the shirt and pulled it towards his face to wipe away the moisture. He continued, “I’ve been at this for the last two hours. Trying to get into shape.”

“Did you inherit the ability? Looks like it takes a lot of coordination.”

“I think I was always in tune with my body. It came naturally.”

“You have a great style. You must enjoy performing.”

“I’ve done acting and that’s an important part of the magic show. Let me show you another trick.”

He pulled out juggling balls and had them glide up and down his arms. I was witnessing a one-man dance performer.

“It’s like you are choreographing the balls. You know I’ve been to the Hocus Pocus. Have you performed there?” His eyes never left the balls. I couldn’t help being enthralled by his concentration. I needed to focus on a project to stop fixating on myself and Mark.

“I’ve enjoyed talking to you. Here’s my card. Call me sometime and I can invite you when I do a show. I’m Brett.”

“I would love to.” I was electrified when he handed me his card and caressed my hand with smooth delicate motions that were tracing the knuckles and joints of my fingers. Maybe he wasn’t straight. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone flirted with me.

CHAPTER 18

The Waiting Game

I cursed the vibration from my iPhone. Seeing the Country Home number convinced me to let it go to voicemail. I did not want to deal with the beast and his issues. But then my spine refused to ignore it and I accepted the intrusive call.

“What is it this time?”

“Your father was admitted to Beverly Hospital earlier today. He was having trouble breathing. We’ve been trying to reach you.”

I decided to take the thirty-minute walk to the hospital. Let Brett’s good vibrations juggle in my head before I organized competing thoughts about my revolting father and another abandonment I would face if he died. Parking was impossible near the Beverly Hospital. The last visit to the hospital was thirty-two years ago when I bid farewell to Mother. The expansion of this floating medical city towered over Hollywood. Friends told me it had become a factory assembly line of care. A perfect end for Daddy who spent most of his life as a supervisor for clothing assemblers in the garment district warehouse on Cooper Street. He complained, “All day long I’m the taskmaster in this sweatshop. Making sure each garment is quickly built to perfection. Ensuring buttons were fastened correctly. Watching for flaws in the seams. Walking up and down the rows watching the scum workers.” Dad’s assembly line job was finishing him off with assembly line medical care.

During the summer, Mom would plan field trips to downtown Los Angeles that included a visit to Jack’s employment. Mom looked for remnants to sew dresses or upholster chairs and then we had lunch at Clifton’s Cafeteria.

We filled our stomachs with jazzy scalloped potatoes and cherry pie. Afterwards we traipsed through the Central Library staring at the rotunda ceiling painted by local artist Julian Garnsey with the Zodiac chandelier. Remembering this break during the barren summer provided enough juice to pretend I had a happy childhood.

When I arrived at Beverly Hospital, I asked to talk to Jack's doctor before I entered Father's room.

"Your father should be dead. He does everything wrong. Smokes and drinks and his cholesterol and sugar numbers are through the roof. He's a walking miracle."

"Yeh, he's a pigheaded ass that won't listen to anyone. So, what's the prognosis this time?"

"Well, he's got to be on oxygen all day because his lungs aren't working correctly. The plan is we'll send him back to the nursing home with an oxygen tank and instructions. I know how stubborn your father is but he'll get used to the nasal cannula, the prong tubing that goes into his nostrils. And if he takes the heart medication, he'll be fine. I can discharge him tomorrow morning."

When I peeked in the room, Jack was sleeping again. Despite the nasal attachment he looked refreshed and calm. No longer struggling for breath. I was relieved. I wasn't ready to let my hate go without a final conversation. I kissed his forehead and left for home.

The return stroll took me north by La Cienega Restaurant Row. The Row was devastated by the changing tastes of millennials in the new century. The snooty L'Orangerie was where we celebrated Gilbert's birthday. The days of piss elegant dining were gone.

I passed King's Road Park expecting to have another encounter with Brett; instead I saw Mark sprawled on a

wooden bench. My heart stilled when I approached him. An alcohol smell like my father was discharging from Mark.

I told Mark, “Hey, stranger.”

He erratically responded, “Sorry I haven’t returned your calls or texts because I’ve been bummed out worrying about what the DNA would show. Then I received an email from the site and that’s why I’m here. I wanted to surprise you so we could share this together.”

The mystery as to why I hadn’t heard from him was solved.

I asked, “How long have you been waiting for me?”

“It doesn’t matter. Don’t you want to see what they found?”

I ignored his stalking-like actions and said, “Okay, let’s go up to my place.”

Within minutes we sat at my dining room table about to witness our fate. I grabbed my Acer laptop and dramatically searched for the site. I tried to slow my breathing while Mark’s foot kept tapping. After entering the password, we read together a bunch of statistics, charts, and columns with the child tested and alleged father. All incomprehensible until we scanned to the bottom of the report for the conclusions. *Is excluded as the biological father**. The asterisk explained –this means the possible father is not the biological father of the child, since all data gathered doesn’t support a relationship of paternity.

Before I could react, Mark jumped up, pushing his chair against the wall with a violent force threatening the chair to crumble. He screamed, “This stupid test. It’s wrong! You must be my father.” His ferocious face searched for escape.

I had my own kaleidoscope of furious thoughts. *Enraged that Mark had played me. Did he want access to my money? That I let myself get so worked up believing he was my son. Crazy plans of having a purpose. Someone I could mentor. A*

way to stop being preoccupied with my shallow existence. Maybe it was a mistake. It couldn't just be a coincidence that I'd had sex with the prostitute that claimed to be Mark's mother. My hands were clammy. A burning fire inched up my esophagus that extinguished when I belched.

I called out to Mark when he reached the door, "Hold on. Don't just leave."

Mark's hand seized the door knob wanting to rip it off. I ran after him, "You're acting like a child. Calm down." My anger dissipated and I looked for a positive spin.

"I know I've screwed up but what about taking the test again? Maybe it's wrong. I heard that using spit to check the DNA is a preferred method."

Mark's face turned ashen, "I don't want to go through this again. It's too painful."

When I reached for Mark's shoulders to hug him, he descended into the sobs of an abandoned animal. Suddenly he was bristling away from me, swatting at my arms. My forearms felt battered.

Mark said, "You lied to me. Why?"

"What are you talking about?"

Mark explained, "I read your blog and saw the poem of the week about a prostitute. You never admitted to me that you'd been to a prostitute. I printed it out:

We survived bullying at Fairfax High School

We came out at the Gay and Lesbian Center

We were afraid to tell our alcoholic fathers we were gay

We let our father take us to a prostitute to convert us"

He spit out, "That proves that you're my father."

“Wait a minute. That poem isn’t just about me. It’s what gay people went through when I was growing up. I used the “we” format. Look, it doesn’t prove anything. I didn’t really lie to you, I just blocked out the memories of my father taking me to a prostitute. It was a horrible time in my life after my mom had died and my best friend Ethan had been banished by my father.”

“So, you do remember. Why couldn’t you tell me? I bared my soul to you and you couldn’t even admit that you did in fact go to a prostitute. She remembered your name. You had sex with my mother and I’m the result.”

I felt like shit and wanted to believe him.

I rambled, “I’m sorry. I know I’ve ruined everything. What if I order another test? I want to make this up to you.” I hated that I was groveling to Mark.

“Do what you want. I don’t know if I want you for my father.”

“Come on, Mark. I know I haven’t been honest with you. I didn’t want to get your hopes up. I want to believe you are my son. I would do anything to make that a reality.”

I looked for forgiveness, a magic potion to remove his frown, knitting the bridge between his large blue-green expressive eyes. Those similar eyes that Gilbert possessed that I used to stare into. Instead, Mark, the spoiled child exited with the finality of a slammed door. I shivered from his intense anger and swings in personality. My depression came roaring back until he called later that day and said, “I am sorry, Lynn. I just had such high expectations. You must hate me.”

“No. I understand. But I do want to take the test again.”

“Sure. Go ahead and set that up.” The embers of my depression started to flame out.

“Lynn, I am going to a swimming clinic at the West Hollywood Pool this evening. We’re getting ready for regionals and our coach P.J. is having everyone work on their turns. Why don’t you come and watch?”

I was hesitant. I hadn’t spoken to anyone on the swim team since Gilbert’s death. What would it be like to see the workout and Gilbert being invisible?

He told me, “I’ve never had anyone watch me swim. It means a lot to me. Please.”

After relenting and the sun had finished its daily job, Mark scooped me up in his Black Honda Civic that transported us to the parking structure on San Vicente Boulevard.

“Shit, it’s late. I’ve got to be in the water before the session begins so I’ve got to run. There isn’t any place to sit so I don’t expect you to watch the entire workout.” And he was off as he grabbed his swim bag.

The pool was nestled in West Hollywood Park. This was the home of the yearly Gay Pride Festival, dog parks and library that hovered over the walking city of West Hollywood. Spotlights bounced off the water that illuminated the pool and swimmers. I initially thought Mark was underweight but with him wearing only tight Speedos, I realized he had a fat-free sculptured muscular body. Damn. I couldn’t think incestuous thoughts. The comradery between the swimmers was on full display as they synchronized their swimming strokes. These guys could audition for Matthew Bourne’s all male ballet *Swan Lake* with their elegant moves. The Tchaikovsky melody exploded while I watched the sea of boys. No glorious hair, only colorful swim caps gripping their heads. Their goggles made them ready to race. I felt a chapter hitting me for my memoirs. The pride of watching my son swim.

I edged closer to the pool to say goodbye to Mark during a short break. I pantomimed that we would talk and that I loved watching him swim. Jerome had left the pool and was coming

towards me,” Hey, Lynn. It’s been ages since I’ve seen you. Could it be ten years?”

“Maybe. I got the invites to the Christmas parties but I just couldn’t bring myself to go. Too painful.”

“Gilbert was always so thrilled that you came with him to regionals, IGLA, and Gay Games. We thought of you as a member of the team. So, don’t be a stranger. Andrea is always asking me, ‘What happened to Lynn?’”

“Yes, it’s nice to see the old gang.”

“Are you and Mark dating?”

“Oh no. Just friends.”

“He told us he was straight but we always wondered.”

After I walked away the image of Gilbert hit me. A good pity party cry on my walk back to King’s Road.

The outcome of the DNA was gnawing at me during the walk back to Hampton Place, the original name for my condominium complex. I needed clarity. It seemed to imply by default that I wasn’t genetically connected to Mark. The site didn’t answer all my questions.

Mark must be my focus. I scurried into my bedroom and powered up my laptop. The DNA website popped on my screen. After clicking on *Contact Us*, I was unable to find a phone number. The current fad of using the chat rather than a live person for help was frustrating. I returned to the graphs and analysis. Hoping that we had missed something because we were rushing and jumped ahead to the summary. And then I screamed. In small print it said, “Inconclusive”. I checked Google and apparently it means that from the current samples neither a “yes” or “no” resulted. The samples did not yield enough DNA. This means we must retest and this time with a better quality company. Google brought up an alternate site called *Ancestry Help* that used saliva rather than the cheek

swab technique. I called Mark and left a message with my discovery.

The vibration from my iPhone distracted me. Country Home again.

“We wanted to notify you that we can’t accept your father back at our facility. You’ve got to understand, we aren’t set up to handle his needs now that he’ll require oxygen continuously. I’m sure you’ll need to find another institution. We’ve bagged up all his belongings for you so you can pick them up whenever you like.”

I fumed, “No warning. You are just dumping him on the street. How am I supposed to find a place for him now?”

“We can suggest a few options. You might want to get a social worker agent.”

When I called Dennis, the man who originally placed Jack in Country Home, he explained, “Things are tighter right now. And I’m finding that the choices for strict Medi-Cal are limited. Try the Jewish Home Village in the valley.”

“Hm, all the way in the valley. I can’t imagine schlepping out there when they complain about Dad’s behavior. Thanks.”

I spent the remainder of the day hunting and pecking through the internet for a suitable new prison for daddy. The Jewish Home Village in Reseda took Medi-Cal and had an opening. The visual tour looked inviting with natural lighting, a radial corridor and grand piano. Too nice for the beast. I called the hospital to verify when he’d be discharged in the morning so I could transport Jack to the Reseda oven. This could be a win-win situation with him being a twenty-mile distance away. Washing my hands of the beast of burden would be liberating.

Mark hadn’t returned my call. If he was still stung by the DNA, I would give him time to work up the courage for a do-over.

Upon my arrival at Beverly Hospital, Jack was sitting in a wheelchair ready for transport. The nurse carefully helped him into my car attached to an oxygen tank. After he was secured and seat belted, she came around to the driver's side and spoke to me, "Make sure he keeps the nostril plugs connected all the time. He needs that oxygen to breathe and here are the instructions for wherever you are taking him. Good luck. I can see he's a handful. You are a good son."

Within minutes the beast had pulled out a cigarette pack and searched his pocket for a match.

"You are insane. You can't smoke. And not in my car. You're going to blow us up with the oxygen."

"Oh, give me a break. It's just one cigarette a day. No big deal. It's not going to kill me."

I pulled off La Cienega, abruptly stopped and Jack's pack of cigarettes flew out of his hand. After confiscating each component of his filthy habit, I told him, "It's dangerous. You could start a fire. You might not care about yourself but I don't want to burst into flames while I'm driving."

He pouted and turned on the car radio at full blast until my ears raged in pain. The beast had become an insolent baby. I shut off the culprit and softly asked, "Dad, I've been thinking about when you took me to the prostitute."

"Yes, wasn't she hot? You know I tried her out the night before."

"What did you say?"

And when he repeated himself, I felt bile in my mouth and wanted to stop the car again to regurgitate. What kind of father tests a prostitute for his son? This was an abomination. Mark can never meet this monster. My brain had a flash on the image of Dad looking at the prostitute before I entered her sexual den. I'd always wondered if they knew each other. Dad's revelation explained more of the warped episode that I had tried to forget.

I was screaming at him, “It was 1987. Weren’t you worried about me getting AIDS and yourself, too?”

“That just affected fags. Why are you asking?”

“But drug users and prostitutes were getting infected too.”

Dad asked, “Didn’t you use a rubber?”

“It was so fast. I had trouble getting hard. The evening is a blur. It’s even possible that I found the condom on the floor afterwards.”

I squeezed this information into my brain-safe and tossed the key into the abyss.

“You love to worry, Lynn. It was over thirty years ago. You’re fine. But before I die, I want to see you married. Some nice Jewish girl. I want a grandchild.”

Blind and ignorant Jack looked at me without acknowledging my love of men. Why did he think I never got married? I never brought girls to our apartment. And he just told me I was queer the last time I saw him. God may have answered his prayers with Mark but the beast is never going to find out.

“Dad, do you ever wonder what things would be like if Mom was alive?”

“Yeh, she’d be taking care of me and not putting me away in another dump. You’re escaping your duties by abandoning me. Where is this God-forsaken place we’re going? I’ve got to pee.”

“We’re almost there, sir.”

He laughed whenever I appeared to be showing respect.

Upon arrival the grounds were well manicured, reflecting an undeserved good omen for Dad’s final days. A furnace of heat greeted us as we escaped from the car. The white coated female attendant who could pass for Nurse Ratched from *One Flew*

Over the Cuckoo's Nest appeared with a wheelchair to escort Father to his new home.

Surprisingly the images from the website accurately reflected the surroundings. The spotless environment didn't have any of the odors that percolated at Country Home. The over six-foot man rose behind a wooden desk and spoke, "Welcome. You must be Jack Pinchas. We've been waiting for you. I'll take you to your room while your son fills out paperwork."

After the niceties of checking Jack in with proof of Medi-Cal, prescriptions, and new instructions about the oxygen, I was relieved. I prayed that the competent-looking staff could handle difficult cases.

"Don't worry about your father. We'll take good care of him. We're assigning Maria to him."

Ah good; you can tame the beast.

Hillside Cemetery was the next destination. Both Gilbert and Mom were buried there. A two-for-one special that would bring clarity to the fog I carried around with me. The upper valley location was infrequently visited. I approached Mom's headstone with trepidation. Would she curse me because I hadn't let Jack move into my condo so I could care for him? The intense heat was going to make this a quick and dirty visit.

I followed the Jewish tradition of placing rocks on her grave. No prayer came to mind but I could have a corny talk with her.

"Mom, you might have a grandson. And guess what? I have a chance to be a father. A real father. Nothing like Dad. His name is Mark. I think you'd like him. I am going to cook for him someday. The turkey meatloaf recipe that you taught me and how your tricks would make it ooze juice. Oh, I miss you. I think about you a lot. You've been my protective angel for the last thirty years. Thank you." My ritual of playing Mom's favorite song on my iPhone ended the conversation, "And I am

Telling You I'm Not Going.” When she first got diagnosed with lung cancer, she told me she wasn’t going anywhere. She said, “Just like the song from *Dreamgirls*.” The line, ‘I’m not living without you,’ was fracturing me. And when Jennifer Holiday sang, “We both share the same blood,” it was a sign about Mark.

At Gilbert’s grave I laid down next to his stone while I spoke, “Gilbert, I can’t believe it’s been ten years since I’ve seen you. You would have been so proud of me because I gave a *drash* at temple. It went over big-time with lots of comments afterwards. And more news. I have a son! We could have raised him together. Can you believe it? I think he looks a little bit like me, except shorter. And you should see how he swims, like Michael Phelps. Remember when we watched the Olympics together? I never thought I could enjoy watching sports until you made it exciting for me. And even though he is thirty, he’s immature. I’m going to teach him about literature and poetry. I’ll introduce Mark to Whitman, Willa Cather, and Leontyne Price. He’s straight. I know you would say, ‘Nobody’s Perfect.’ from your favorite film *Some Like It Hot*.

Enough crying to fill a pity-me carton. The iPhone vibrated and Mark’s number appeared.

“Hey. What’s been going on? I was worried about you. Are you still mad at me?”

“No. I’ve been upset with this whole DNA testing.”

“I’ve got good news. I found a different site. This time it will be using spit rather than the swab technique. It’s more accurate. Come over tonight. We can do the deed and this time I swear we’ll get the right outcome.”

“Okay, but this is the last time. I am not doing this again, Lynn.”

“I’ll make dinner. Will six work?”

“Sure. I’ll bring dessert.”

Trader Joe's would fulfill the special menu for Mark's first exposure to my culinary expertise; ground turkey, an oversized sweet potato, a sixteen-ingredient bursting salad, created from scratch, spicy lentil soup, and roasted vegetables. I knew those cooking classes at Hipcooks on Robertson Boulevard would be my salvation. And of course, recreating mom's famous turkey loaf.

The rarely used butch-looking china and cutlery Gilbert bought at Crate and Barrel would work as the finishing touches to the meal of the century. When Gilbert moved into the condo, he proceeded to change the black towels, frilly dishes, colored utensils, and flower designed sheets. I let his hurtful words, "It's not my taste, Lynn. I'll buy the kind of stuff that we'll both like," slide. It was easier to be passive and not wrestle with him. The rough and ready abstract design with large heavy utensils suited Gilbert's personality and commemorated our love nest.

At ten after seven I charged into shattering mode without Mark's appearance. His faithfully ontime pattern was broken. The ringing phone relieved the unease.

"I'm running behind. Give me ten minutes."

Biting my tongue to produce blood wouldn't stop the turkey loaf from being dried out. Finn or Sondheim would have to be my consolation prize until Mark arrived. "Late for Dinner" from *March of the Falsettos* or "Waiting Around for The Girls Upstairs" from *Follies* seeped through my speakers.

At seven forty-five Mark appeared at my door. Lukewarm food was splayed across the table. His eyes were discolored, he was cradling his arm and there were bloodstains on his shirt.

"What happened?"

"I was mugged after I left my shift at Trader Joe's. I'll be fine. This man had followed me to my car and was screaming at me. I said that I didn't have any money or credit cards. He

didn't believe me. I lashed out at him with my fists and started to run but he was a young kid and caught up with me. When he punched me in the eye, I was startled. He grabbed my wallet and was gone."

"He could have murdered you. And no one was around to help you?"

"No, I parked almost a mile away. It's a deserted area of Hollywood near Gower."

"Let me put some ice on your eye. Is your hand okay?"

"It's nothing, Lynn. Do you have something to drink? A beer?"

"I have some leftover wine."

"Perfect. I need to relax." Mark proceeded to use the empty large water glass on the table for the wine. His glass was filled to the brim after he poured the remains of the Cabernet Sauvignon. Gulping rather than slurping within minutes.

"Oh, God. I feel much better. Now I'm starving. What a beautiful table."

"You know, I've never been in a fight, Mark. I was always afraid to stand up for myself. And Dad never taught me how to physically fight off bullies. But Mark, there are smart ways to defend yourself without risking your life."

"I had to learn fighting skills or I would have been beaten up at the foster home."

"This is different. This guy was threatening your life. Look, I was constantly being stomach punched on my way home from Burroughs Junior High by my nemesis Richard. It felt like my insides would collapse. I ran home in tears, but when Mom asked me what was wrong, I said nothing. I was embarrassed that I couldn't fight. That it was my fault. I deserved what I got. But I learned how to use words and humor to deflect

danger. I became an expert at distracting tormentors. And if that didn't work, I drifted into a fantasy world."

Each time I was pulverized, daydreaming allowed an escape until the time Richard trampled me physically and the wounds were visible. I was bleeding from the nose and limping up the stairs to the apartment. Mom looked aghast, "Oh my God. Lynn, you're hurt. Who did this to you?"

That time I confessed, "This kid from school Richard was hiding in the bushes, jumped out and started hitting me. He kept screaming faggot. I didn't know what to do. He pinned me to the ground and pounded his fists into my head."

"But why, Lynn? Why was he picking on you?"

"I don't know, Mom. Everyone hates me at school. They call me snotty face. What is wrong with me?"

"Let me get something for your nose." She proceeded to put cotton in my nostrils and covered my nose with an ice pack. "We want the swelling to go down. You're probably going to have a black eye."

"I'll look even worse. What is Dad going to say?"

"We won't tell him. Maybe I can put on some makeup to cover it up."

"I don't want to go back to school. The semester is almost over and then I'll be going to Fairfax High."

"You have to finish ninth grade."

That evening, she swept me into her arms and glided her velvety hands through my hair. She sang an old song to me, "Que Sera Que Sera. Whatever will be will be," until I fell asleep.

On my next encounter with Richard, I told him, "I know why you like picking on me, because you know I won't fight back. Instead of fighting, what about playing poker for money?

See if you can beat me.” I let Richard win and it was worth losing money to him because he no longer battered me.

Now Mark needed counseling to give him a fighting chance and let me be a better parent than Jack. I would be his mentor.

The swiftly eaten dinner before more damage could be done to the delicacies, enabled us to quickly finish DNA test number two.

“It’s sort of disgusting using spit for DNA.”

“Let’s just do it, Lynn.”

I read the instructions to Mark.

Brush your teeth and/or use mouthwash.

Don’t eat, drink, smoke, or chew gum or tobacco for 30 minutes after brushing your teeth and before providing your saliva sample.

To encourage saliva production, gently rub your cheeks from the outside (pressing them against your teeth and gums) before spitting into the tube.

Spit into the tube until your saliva reaches the wavy black line.

Seal the tube in the collection bag that came with the kit.

Put the collection bag in the return mailer and put it in the mail.

You should receive your results within 8 weeks of the date the laboratory receives your sample.

During the thirty-minute wait, I suggested we could look at my photo albums.

“I know nothing about your parents. I guess they would be my grandparents. That sounds so weird but nice to say out loud.”

I carefully handed him a photo album that had been cloistered in the hall closet. Dusty pages were stuck together and the white photo corners were barely sticking to the snapshots that originally were attached to the black pages. “Not much to see. My parents weren’t into picture taking.”

Mark laughed, “You were so fat as a baby. It’s adorable. I don’t have any photos until I became a teenager.”

“By the time I was five I was super thin. Everyone said after you reach forty, you’ll wish you didn’t gain weight. As you can see, that didn’t happen with me. High metabolism, I guess. Oh, please don’t look at those. I was so ugly.”

“No. You just have a little acne. I was lucky that I hardly ever got pimples.”

“I hated the way my face looked. And it was on my chest and back. It took forever to go away. Even now when I get stressed out, I’ll break out. Cursed with adult acne.”

“So where are your parents?”

“Mom died before I graduated high school. I put her pictures in a separate album if I need a good cry.”

“And your father?”

“I can’t talk about my father because we have a communication problem. He treated me like I was a stranger when I was growing up. Never showing any love. A burden and a painful reminder of my mother. I call him Jack the beast. Enough about him. Let’s look at the rest of the album.”

Thankfully Mark didn’t ask any more questions. The next set of pictures were at my retirement party from CHR. In the photo there was a sign above me that said *Congrats Lynn for Twenty-Five Years of Service*. Mark told me, “I can’t imagine working at the same place for twenty-five years. You are so old school, Lynn.”

After thirty minutes passed, we began our drooling and followed the instructions religiously. The four to six week waiting game began again. A sweet hug and Mark was gone.

CHAPTER 19

Cruising

There was a notification about the DNA results. After finding the password and clicking on the website I took a harrowing breath before I began reading the outcome.

“No father-son relationship detected.”

What? An impossible second opinion. Mark was just getting used to me being his parent. I was determined to keep this revelation a secret a bit longer. I compartmentalized the results, letting dormant endorphins free themselves. Quality time with Mark should be a seven-day vacation. A fantasy where I’m his father.

“Mark, can you get off five days for a cruise? It’s one way that starts in Los Angeles, stops in Santa Barbara, San Francisco, Seattle, Victoria Island and ends in Vancouver. We fly home from Vancouver. It’s my treat. End of September.” The phone was silent until he said, “Let me talk to my boss. If it’s only a week I think I can swing it.”

The San Pedro check-in was seamless as we were shuffled through security, establishing credit for purchases, and were issued keys to our cabin. The snapping photographer during the boarding process was awkward. Would hugging be appropriate? We stood side by side smiling. Our floating Sweden Cruise Line home for the next seven days was drenched in luxury. We’d been upgraded to a suite that included tile floors and a spacious walking area rather than the standard cubbyhole cabins. Two sinks in the bathroom and a tub that cried for a relaxing bubble bath. The large sliding glass opened to a spacious balcony with two chairs.

Mark asked, “How did you get this upgrade? The only other cruise I’ve been on was a three-day Catalina, San Diego and Ensenada and we were like sardines in the room. I went with David from the swim team.”

“And he knows you’re straight? That’s odd. I wonder if he thought you could be had.”

Mark asked what that meant and I explained, “When a gay man thinks a straight guy could be gay.” Mark laughed and said, “He’s just a friend. I get along great with David. We’ve gone to watch the Dodgers and the Lakers.”

I gulped at the thought of subjecting myself to a sporting event. Thank God Dad never dragged me to a baseball game or forced me to watch endless hours of football with him. Seems like the *sports* gene skipped a generation.

“There was some sort of cancellation at the last minute and the suite was available. I wanted to ask you something. You know we’ll be having a sit-down dinner and there is no way to know who else will be assigned to our table. Of course, they are going to look at us and ask if we’re friends or brothers or maybe I’m your father.”

“So, what are you suggesting?”

“What if we just pretended, I am your father? I mean that is what we’re hoping for when we get the second DNA test results, right?”

“That reminds me, hasn’t it been a month since we sent the vials to the lab?”

“Yes. Maybe it’s just delayed. I haven’t been checking every day. When we get back, we’ll look.”

Mark’s hands trembled before he said, “I want you to be my father. And that’s what you want, too?”

“Yes, it’s like we are putting on a performance. Rehearsing for when it becomes a reality.”

I hated lying. First, that I hadn't told Mark about the test outcome showing no matching genes, and then faking our relationship on the ship. It was just seven days. We wouldn't see these passengers again. And it would be good for both of us to have this time designated as father and son.

The table was a diverse mix. Elderly sisters, Elle and Jackie, introduced themselves, "This is our eighth cruise with Sweden. We love getting the royal treatment for returned customers." Possibly gay millennials, Henry and Craig told us, "First cruise. It's dope that we get to spend time on State Street in Santa Barbara, San Francisco's new art museum, and Butchart Gardens in Victoria." The Latino family included parents Maria and Paco with their children, Elena and Gregory, who explained, "This is a gift to our parents for their thirtieth anniversary."

"I'm Lynn and this is my son, Mark. We are reconnecting after years of being estranged." Mark looked downward embarrassed by my revelation.

The endless array of courses beginning with Caesar salad laden with anchovies, bursting with flavor, minestrone soup, scallop potatoes dripping with moisture, salmon dissolving into our mouths, smothered in butter asparagus and ending with a gluten-free tart key lime pie plucking the lining of our throat. I wasn't going to be surprised if we both ended the trip with platonic love handles. Mark asked me if it was okay if he had a glass of wine with dinner.

He explained, "I like to be relaxed when I'm eating." Liquor wasn't included in the package deal so I appreciated Mark getting approval.

Later that evening Mark told me, "Estranged? If someone asks me about that, I am not going to make something up. I hope this is a good idea. Don't want to get tripped up with a string of lies."

“Don’t worry, Mark, it’s a vacation. No one cares about our story. Since we are still learning about each other I didn’t want our tablemates to be confused that we don’t know each other’s history. They’ll understand.”

The two-hour walk on historic State Street in Santa Barbara took us from the ocean pier through glaciers of independent restaurants and chic tourist shops. Mark’s shallow attention span allowed little time to linger for a shopping spree.

“Lynn, when do we need to get back to the ship? I’m tired of walking. It’s very different from being in the water and kicking and I’d like to take a swim when we get back. I’m so used to swimming every day.”

That killed the afternoon stroll. Hopefully the next stop in San Francisco would be more engaging for him. I wanted to spend time in the San Francisco Modern Art Museum. The Lewis Wickes Hine photograph called Woman with Folded Headdress, Ellis Island was on display and a must-see on my bucket list.

But when we entered San Francisco Mark said, “I want to work out with the swim team here, Tsunami, at the Aquatic Center. You go do your thing and I’ll meet up with you later.” So, this is what being a parent feels like. What would Dr. Spock advise? Gilbert was the same way. Having withdrawal if he didn’t get in the ocean or pool. I pretended to smile at Mark as he traipsed off into the heart of the city.

That evening, before dressing for dinner, Mark explained, “I know you probably thought I was rude abandoning you this morning. I’ve been wanting to tell you more about these tremors. I was diagnosed with YOPD which stands for Young Onset of Parkinson’s Disease.”

“I thought that only affected the elderly.”

“Yeh, I wish that was the case. I’m in the rare group that impacts people under fifty. It’s inherited. Kind of the reason I

wanted to know my parents. The doctor told me it might help if I could track down my family history.”

“Now I understand why swimming is so important to you. A wonderful distraction.”

Jack was diagnosed with Parkinson’s when he reached sixty and I thought that was young. Of course, with his unhealthy lifestyle, I wasn’t surprised by any of his ailments.

The remaining nightly dinners were gregarious events bursting with laughs, political arguments, and friendship. Our table was the last to leave the dining room. Mark graduated from wine to martinis to shots before each meal. His playfulness sweetened the vacation.

We dominated the conversation with our daily log, “We splurged and went to the High Tea, right off the Butchart Garden. The violinist serenaded us with Handel and Mark gobbled the cucumber sandwiches along with the blueberry scones smothered in clotted cream. The cream was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I lucked out with a gluten-free scone.”

On the last night of the cruise, I insisted we walk the perimeter of the ship. I wanted to make up for my horrible childhood by being the kind of father I wish I had. Mark was given a second chance. Mark was starving to raise his self-esteem. And maybe his growing up was worse than mine. The sky was bombarded with stars. I pointed to the Big Dipper. A flash streamed across the sky. Mark said, “Did you see that shooting star? Isn’t that a good sign, Dad?” The tears cascaded down my face and Mark reciprocated with his own cry... hugging away our fragility.

After the cruise, we spent a night in Vancouver before the flight back to LAX. We ate at BigHeart Bannock Cultural Café, the finest Native American restaurant in Vancouver. Mark thought nothing of eating buffalo while I stayed with fish.

“Lynn, this has been the best week of my life. Thank you. No matter what happens I want to have you in my life.”

CHAPTER 20

Jack's Saliva

During the getaway with Mark, I had kept my obsession about the results at bay. But upon return to reality, they came bursting back. How could I not be his father if I had impregnated the prostitute? Then I was bludgeoned with the realization that the beast could be Mark's father. The timing was correct. Jack had sex with the prostitute the night before and he could have fertilized her eggs. The worst possible answer. Do I tell Mark this crazy theory or wait until I confirm that Jack could be Mark's father? I would need to get Dad's spit and compare it with Mark's. But why give my father the satisfaction that he has an offspring? That his pungent semen produced another offspring. I procrastinated telling Mark fearing his devastation on how the news would affect him.

I ordered another DNA packet and drove to Dad's Reseda residence. I wasn't dreading the visit since it had been more than a month since I'd seen him. Focusing on being Mark's parent and the cruise had cemented my mood. The competency vibes were circulating the lobby when I asked, "I'm here to see Jack Pinchas. I'm his son, Lynn."

The greeter told me, "Yes, we had to move your father to another room. He was harassing his roommate Alfred. He told him to fuck off. And he still drinks alcohol. We've tried confiscating the liquor but somehow he finds a way to sneak it into his room." This reminded me of the times I had tried to stop his drinking.

Jack's alcohol consumption had begun trolling his work performance. Fearful that he'd lose his job and be unable to support himself, I would call his boss after a binger, "My father won't be able to work today. He has a horrible flu and doesn't

want to infect the other workers.” When he was arrested for drunk driving and had his license revoked, it forced a strategy.

“Dad, you have to stop drinking. You could have killed someone with your car.”

“No, Lynn. The police only stopped me because I was weaving between lanes. No big deal. They are just trying to get their quota of tickets.”

“How are you going to get to work without a license?”

“I can still drive. I’ll be careful.”

“If they stop you, you’ll get arrested. I want you to go into rehab. You have enough health problems. Look, I’ll help you get your license reinstated. You just have to stop drinking.”

“Why should I? I like seeing my friends at the Barking Dog.”

“Look, I made a pledge to mom that I would make sure nothing happened to you. And your insurance is already three thousand dollars a year. Who do you think is helping you pay that?”

“You can’t force me.”

I threatened, “Okay. I’ll stop helping you.” His startled pity look made me say, “Please, Dad, it’s important to me and I don’t want you to die.”

He acquiesced and allowed himself to be checked in for a six-week detox at the Regain Your Life Recovery Center. His insurance paid for a portion and I kicked in the rest.

On my first visit to Jack at the end of week one of his incarceration, he had deteriorated to a shocking shell. When he tried to smile, I noticed a missing tooth. He told me, “You have no idea the hell I’ve been through. They said it was a typical withdrawal. I was shivering so much that I bit down on my mouth and my front tooth fell out.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s difficult but it’s worth it to get the alcohol out of your system.”

“I can’t sleep. I feel sick all the time. I don’t think I can do this.”

“It will get easier. It’s just your first week.” On subsequent visits his color returned and he had a refreshed appearance. No longer bloated. His previously glassy eyes had a vibrancy that I hadn’t witnessed in ages. Mom would have been thrilled.

Jack’s graduation six weeks later from rehab was a charm-filled event. When we got to the apartment he said, “Oh. God. It’s good to be home. You’re right, Lynn. I feel much better and I’ve got energy. Thank you.”

Jack got notification that his license had been reinstated and he returned to work. Fulfilling mom’s request gave me an urgent sense of decency. A sober Jack would permit a loosening of emotional guardrails. The possibility of conversation not being saddled with poison.

I made a surprise visit the following Saturday bringing Jack’s favorite Trader Joe’s Lemonade. Saturday was sports day in the Pinchas household. Jack would snuggle up to the television for hours flipping through worldwide sporting events. Dad was napping when I refrigerated the juice. I wasn’t surprised to see the unwashed dishes piled in the sink. The task of straightening up was ingrained in me. The search for dish soap began by opening the peeling yellow painted cabinet doors. The eyes went directly to the opened vodka bottle. During Dad’s rehab stay I thought I’d cleared out any remaining tokens of liquor. The rampage through the remaining cabinets siphoned off any chance that the beast hadn’t already relapsed. The impact of securing Scotch and rum bottles and draining them in the sink did little to eliminate the gurgling anger.

I gathered up trash bags for the bottles of his vile habit before I left, slammed the door, and screamed to myself “Fuck

you, Jack!” I would no longer be the good gay son. Driving away the last thoughts were *Mom, I did the best I could.*

Thank goodness I finally went to an Al-Anon meeting after endlessly procrastinating. Even though I was an adult child of an alcoholic, I never believed those tell-all groups would work for me. It was Daddy Jack’s issue. Not mine. I didn’t enable Jack. The stories of the other participants were unrelated. I knew any future attempts to coerce the beast to repeat the detox would fail. I resented being a parent to him and another drinking extravaganza would have him disbarred from his nursing home residence.

A proliferation of meetings gave me the opportunity to find a group that suited my sensibilities and the West Hollywood church, home to Alcoholic Anonymous, Over Spenders, Sexual Addicts, and Al-Anon, was my top choice.

I heard frustrating stories about dealing with alcoholic parents.

“He doesn’t understand that it is a disease and needs help. I can’t convince him to get a sponsor or even go to a meeting. He keeps saying he’s a social drinker. I’ve been trying to help. Pay his bills. Look for meetings to go to in his area. I’ve called his work so he doesn’t lose his job and tell them he has a cold.”

I read the literature before the meeting and began to understand the difference between enabling and helping after the confessions. I realized that the stuff I’d done for my father enabled him to continue drinking. I had to make sure I didn’t make the same mistakes with Mark. A miraculous lesson learned from an unexpected place. Al-Anon became a treasured friend like meditating and temple attendance. But now I needed to deal with finding my roots with Jack’s saliva.

I looked for Maria before entering Dad’s room. She reminded me of a Latina Ava Gardner from *Night of the Iguana* who became an earth mother taking care of her flock of inmates

at the Jewish Home Village. Maria was the one bright spot when I visited Dad.

“Maria, is Dad behaving himself? The front desk said there was an incident.”

“It is just Jack being Jack. Don’t worry about him.”

I tentatively entered his new room, “Hi, Dad. Turn down the television.”

“What do you want? I hate it here. I have no friends and I can’t smoke. And this kosher food stinks. Boiled potatoes every night!”

“Give it a chance, it’s only been two months. Listen, I need you to spit into this container.”

“Why should I do anything you want? I’m in the middle of watching the soccer game. Make it quick.”

“It’s important to me. It’s for ancestry because I am working on a family tree. I want to go back hundreds of years. Figure out where I came from.” Jack tried to use his look of confusion to silence me. I had contacted Ancestry Help and asked if they could redo the test between another participant and they assured me that they still had Mark’s saliva. They reiterated how important it was to follow the directions exactly to get accurate results. That would be an insurmountable challenge with Jack.

“All you have to do is brush your teeth, wait thirty minutes and then spit into this tube.”

“Whatever you want, Lynn.” A rare subservient response.

“Dad, I want to be sure we get enough saliva. I’m going to massage your cheeks.” I couldn’t remember the last time I had touched his face. His fleshy cheeks pressed against his teeth during the rubdown. Years of drinking had left his skin bloated and blotched. Drool began cascading down his chin so I quickly held the tube to capture a chunk of his spit. More than

enough to fill the tube. Jack had always been an expert spitter. During family vehicle field trips forty years ago, Jack would open the door to discharge a vat of phlegm when the car was perched at a stoplight. Mom and I would scream, “Use a tissue!”

I feigned looking at my phone.

“Thanks, Dad. I need to leave. I’ll spend more time on my next visit.”

The beast ignored me and turned his television to ear-piercing volume for the remainder of the game. I sealed the specimen in the envelope from Ancestry Help and dropped it off at the post office on my return to civilization on my side of the hill.

CHAPTER 21

Hocus Pocus

I'd been contemplating contacting the magician juggler, Brett. Since Gilbert died ten years ago, I never dated. Brett's undetermined sexuality might be awkward. Still, I called him," Hey Brett, this is Lynn. We met at King's Road Park. You were juggling."

"Yes, I remember you. You know I'm doing my act at the Hocus Pocus this Saturday night. Would you like to see me perform? I can get you passes and you could bring a guest."

"I would be going alone."

A knotty pause until he came back with, "We'll need to take separate cars because I'll be doing multiple shows. Are you sure that's okay?"

"Yes, Brett. Can I take you to dinner at the Hocus Pocus? My treat."

"That would be incredible. We should eat early so I'll have time to rehearse. How about six?"

"Perfect. I'll see you then." Mixed messages but when I sweetened the engagement with paying for dinner, Brett warmed toward me. He's probably clueless that this is a date.

I dressed for success on Saturday night. Blue Dockers, pressed to perfection with a black blazer and a white oxford shirt, would be the winning outfit for the Hocus Pocus. And the yellow paisley-designed Neiman Marcus tie would finish me off. When I arrived, the gaudy chic décor of bleeding reds and mahogany gave the illusion of opulence. Tacky portraits of Houdini and Doug Henning filled the Victorian wallpapered walls. The blistering clutter of mirrors and chunks of Tiffany

light fixtures reminded me of Las Vegas. My eyes were tired of the spectacle.

After I gave my name to the maitre'd, he looked confused.

“Maybe it’s under the name Brett. He’s one of the entertainers.”

“No, I don’t see that for dinner reservations.”

I was sinking into quicksand until I saw Brett strut in. He told the maitre'd, “William, this is my guest. We’re having dinner.”

“You should have made reservations. Let’s see what I have available.”

Brett whispered, “William is impossible. He’s the definition of snooty.” Brett had cleaned up although the buttons on his sports jacket were within an inch of bursting. His face captured the light in the room and the blonde highlights running through his newly manicured haircut gave him an irresistible charisma. Between his expert juggling and his appearance, he should win over the audience.

While we waited for William to decide which undesirable table to place us at, we listened to the ghost player piano called Esmeralda. You only had to mention a song and Esmeralda, the invisible ghost, would play it. We watched the black and white keys of the piano pound out nostalgic melodies. We tried tricking her with obscure 60s songs. Esmeralda got confused when we asked her to play “Little Girl” by the Syndicate of Sound.

Twenty minutes later William showed us to our table by the bathroom. Walking by the meat-eating customers was nauseating. They wouldn’t be caught dead in organic vegan West Hollywood. The tablecloth, multiple crystal glasses and Wedgewood china reeked of old guard luxury from a bygone era.

“You know the last time I was here it was for a Houdini séance. We were celebrating my fifth anniversary with my lover Gilbert. We invited some friends and had a private room. Talk about extravagance. The canned words booming through the room were like a tame Disneyland ride. The table moved, lights flickered, and spooky music tried their best to give us a taste of a real séance.”

“I get the picture, Lynn. Why didn’t you invite your lover tonight?”

“He died almost ten years ago.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that. What was he like?”

“The nicest tease in the world. He loved magic and the way he loved me was mystic. He would always tell me that miracles are no different from magic tricks. You want to believe they are real. You don’t really want to know how it is done.”

Brett took my hand and said, “I’m jealous of Gilbert. He sounds remarkable. I can see why you must have loved him very much.” Brett’s sweaty hands were enticing. As though a part of him was seeping into me.

“Are you trying to make me cry, Brett?”

“Just putting a spell on you so you’ll like me.”

“Oh please. The moment I saw you juggling in the park you had me.”

Was that me talking to him? There was no way Brett would be responding to me like this. Yet he was caressing my hands.

“I like the way your hands feel, Lynn. Smooth and rough at the same time. What’s your trick?”

I laughed, “Stop teasing me. And save your charm for the show.”

“That reminds me. We need to order. I must rehearse and I hate eating too close to when I do my act.”

We started with an orgasmic asparagus soup, tart busting chicken piccata on top of wild rice and ending the meal with a double flourless chocolate cake. A surprise that the meat-heavy menu had room for gluten-free entrees and desserts.

“My show is at nine in the Mustache Room. I have a break afterwards so we can talk before I do another show.” Brett bounced away leaving me glowing from the gourmet morsels digesting in my fragile stomach and the surprise beginning of intimacy.

Strolling the establishment became a minefield of magic history exhibits. There was a whole section devoted to David Copperfield. At the British Rabbit Pub the bartender was making martini olives disappear from a customer drink and magically appear in a glass at the end of the counter. And there were crazy rabbit *tchotchkies* cluttered into curio cabinets in the corners of the hallways. I loved looking at the artifacts of a coffin sawed in half and a water tank enclosure that Houdini might have drowned in.

The long staircase took me down to the various showrooms. There was a crowd gathering outside the Mustache room where Brett would be performing. Upon entering the dimly lit room, I notched a side table towards the front. I wanted a bird’s eye view but far enough away to not intimidate Brett. The overflowing audience boded well for his debut.

Floodlights came on when the master of ceremonies announced Brett, “You may have seen Brett in the West Hollywood Magic Club. Well, now he’s making his debut at the Hocus Pocus. And he has a surprise for you tonight. Something new that he’s premiering for the first time.”

As Brett entered sweating under the burdensome lights, I went into my worried fatalistic mind frame.

“I know you’ve seen card tricks before but I’m going to switch things up. I need four volunteers.” When he glanced my way and smiled, I became relaxed for him. Then I panicked

worrying he would pull me out of my chair to volunteer. He picked a seventy-year-old skintight plastic surgery victim, a priest wearing a collar, and two millennials.

“Each of you needs to pick a card, remember it and then return it to me.” Just as each person grabbed a card, and gave it back to Brett, the entire deck fell splattering to the floor. Brett bent down to scoop up the cards and said, “So you are trying to make me do a slippery card trick?” The audience laughed. Brett looked at each of the volunteers and proceeded to identify their cards correctly. We clapped and screamed. The audience was cemented to him for the rest of the set. And when he ended with juggling magic balls that kept disappearing, Brett conquered the room. I wondered if Brett would tell me how he accomplished the magic.

I hugged him during the break. “You were brilliant tonight.”

“You are my good luck charm, Lynn, and thank you for dinner. Look, I have two more shows tonight but we are going to do this again, right? Right now, I need to change my costume, because my clothes are soaking wet.”

I smiled and kissed him on the forehead, “You aren’t getting rid of me so quickly. Call me when you are free so we can set up a real date.” Brett gently kissed me on the lips and wordlessly departed. This fantasy may have temporarily ended that evening but it had the roots to continue.

CHAPTER 22

Marked

Mark cornered me the following day, “What happened with the second test? You must have gotten results by now. It’s been over a month.”

“It was inconclusive again.”

“So, you’ve known all this time and didn’t tell me. I’m angry.” The phone went dead. I tried redialing and listened to the string of endless ringing. Mark’s temper was in full swing. I resigned myself to wait until his boiling point turned to a simmer. On cue the phone rang. I didn’t need an apology and said, “I knew you’d be upset Mark, so that’s why I didn’t say anything.”

“So, what now? Who is my father if you aren’t?”

“I am working on it. Again, I don’t want you to get your hopes up. Trust me. In three weeks, I’ll give you a definitive answer.”

“I don’t have a choice, do I? I’m still upset with you. It’s too painful with this bullshit testing. I can’t take the waiting and your lying. It’s best we don’t have any contact until you have answers.”

“I understand, Mark. I know I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?”

“Right now, I don’t know. I must get to work. Goodbye.”

I knew I deserved this. And I couldn’t discharge the gut sensation that Jack was his father. How would I ever break that to Mark? If it was true would Mark be better off never knowing his ancestry? Three weeks was a monstrous amount of time to wait.

The upcoming date with Brett released a pulverizing apprehension. Sexual performance topped the list of fretting. And I knew nothing about Brett except that I was smitten. Even with Gilbert we never talked about sex or discussed what each of our needs were. It was a natural fit. Gilbert had gobs of history with men and intuitively knew what would make me tingle. Sucking on my toes and cradling my head got me. Gilbert was easy to please and taught me the pleasure principles.

The rendezvous to Santa Monica Pier came first and then Brett kept insisting that he treat me to dinner at Jacksons. The restaurant had kick-started California Cuisine when it opened in 1979. Once you entered the venue you forgot about the shabby outside. String lights, arches and wall décor including a mini-waterfall assembled an A-plus ambience. During the exquisite persimmon salad, salivating striped bass, and the decadent crispy shiitake rice, Brett kept asking me, “Are you okay, Lynn? You seem a little quiet.”

“I’m fine, Brett. I have some family stuff I’m dealing with. My father is in an assisted living situation. Also, I’ve been doing some ancestry research for a family tree. And to tell you the truth I’m nervous about us. I don’t really know much about you.”

“Ask me anything. I’m an open book. And don’t be afraid of me. My friends say I am a big pussycat.”

“Are you one of those rare native Californians?”

“100%. Born at Beverly Hospital in 1980. I was a lightweight baby. I know to look at me now, you probably can’t imagine me ever being thin.”

“You are so different from Gilbert and the few other guys I’ve been with. I like your size. It’s sexy.”

His response, “You’re a chubby chaser,” made me laugh.

“What was it like growing up?”

“We lived in Culver City in this big rundown house. Something was always broken but my dad would turn each calamity into a project. Plumbing and electrical stuff were easy for me. And I was always good with my hands. Plus, there was a humongous backyard with a tree house.”

“Like a Robinson and Crusoe? It was really that perfect.”

“Sorta, yes. During my teenage years I focused on juggling. I avoided any social angst because I spent hours upon hours practicing and perfecting. I was hard on myself. Once I stayed up all night until I could juggle five batons without dropping them.”

“You told me you stopped when you were twenty. That’s when you got into magic.”

“Yeah, I was doing these all-nighters to get ready for this show at the Ice House. I always rehearsed outside, even in the dark. Didn’t want to break anything in the house. The night before I was set to perform, I got this horrible itch. I mean it was crazy. I couldn’t stop scratching myself. I didn’t know what was going on. I noticed red welts and bumps on my arms and legs.”

I chimed in, “I know what you’re talking about. I have to take Benzedrine to get to sleep when I have an itching outbreak!”

“Exactly. I took that and put cortisone cream on the swollen red areas. I needed a good night’s sleep before the show.”

“In the morning I was so sick. I thought I was going to die. I was disoriented and weak. And when I went to the doctor, they couldn’t figure out what was wrong. It took months before they determined it was Lyme disease because so many of my symptoms, headaches, muscle pain, and dizziness were associated with other health issues.”

“So, you must have been bitten by a mosquito.”

“And that’s when I gained all this weight. I turned into a couch potato because I was so weak. Food took away the boredom. The only good thing was I got into magic. It took less physicality than juggling.”

I took his hand and said, “And your miraculous hands were perfect for magic.”

“Well now you know my story, Lynn.”

“No, there is one thing you left out. Your sexuality.”

“I don’t like to be labeled. I guess you’d call me fluid. And it’s not a cop-out to be bisexual. Sex is not an important part of my life. I’ve been attracted to men and women. Too honest for you?”

“No. It’s refreshing.”

Brett smiled and said, “Let’s get out of here. Go back to your place?”

That evening all fears dissolved during the discovery that our bodies were in sync. The unease about performance issues resurfaced when we folded into bed. Brett sensed my hesitancy and let foreplay linger. After gaining confidence I realized that Brett didn’t miss any of my erogenous zones. He became a licking dog. Between making love and laughing and screaming and snuggling, I permitted myself to be happy. The first time I had been with a man since Gilbert died.

The affair with Brett helped speed the three weeks before the new results from Ancestry Help came through. I was notified by email and quickly went to the website. A renaissance of fearlessness had emerged because of Brett. He’d awakened a self-assurance that I could deal with any DNA result.

The convoluted graphs came first with the summary in the final section. I closed my eyes before I looked, praying that there was no match between Mark and Jack. A scream burst

through my throat and exploded through the condo. I blinked a few times to clear my vision, hoping that I had misread the data that revealed a link between Mark and the beast. I slammed the Acer laptop closed and picked it up wanting to discard it. Pacing did little to dissipate this abomination. Any assurance that I could handle this was gone. I wished I had told Brett what I'd done so I could get his take on next steps. Conversation with Dad and Mark would kill me. I was projecting the aftermath of a family plague that replaced the positive affirmations I'd felt before the test results appeared. But my mood changed when I realized that I had a brother.

The vow I made to Mark a month ago left me with the agony of having to reveal his father's identity. This had to be done in person, not on the phone.

He didn't answer when I called so I left the message, "Mark, I heard from Ancestry Help. Please come over after work so we can talk about it." An immediate text came through saying he would be over after his shift ended at eight. I had a few hours to plan what I'd say. I searched my condo for pictures of Jack. I wanted something to show Mark. I looked for a Sondheim song pacifier to get me through. "Anyone Can Whistle" or "Send in the Clowns" were surefire remedies. I tried meditation to normalize my heartbeat. None of my coping mechanisms were working. And then he was downstairs wanting to be let in.

The days of hugging were gone. Mark wore a mask of world weariness.

"Just tell me, Lynn. You made a promise. I want to know."

"Before I tell you I just want to explain what happened." This piqued Mark's interest and his facial muscles relaxed.

I continued, "You were so distraught when you found out we weren't father and son from the first test, I didn't want to add any wrinkles until we got the second results. And when they confirmed that we weren't connected a horrible scenario

hit me. When I told my father about you and that he might be a grandfather, he told me he had sex with Jane, your mother, the evening before he took me to her. He was testing her out. Making sure she would make a man out of me.”

Mark looked disgusted. I realized I may have given him too much information but he wanted the truth.

I continued, “I couldn’t accept that my father might have gotten her pregnant. I know this seems crazy. I mean what are the odds. Yet it kept gnawing at me. So, I contacted Ancestry Help and I asked if I sent in my father’s saliva if they could run it against yours.”

“Why couldn’t you tell me this, Lynn? Again, I find out you lied to me. So many stupid lies. I hate this. It makes me not want to have you as my father if you can’t tell me the truth.”

“I was afraid about what the new DNA would show between you and Dad. I was torn. I didn’t want you to have any expectations while you waited the month. I kept praying that you were my son. I couldn’t face the truth even though the DNA didn’t show any connection between us. Mark, I still wanted to think there was a mistake, that you were mine.”

“So, tell me what it showed.”

“Jack is your father. There were enough DNA cells that matched to ensure your ancestry. So even though you aren’t my son, you’re my half-brother. Same father, different mother.”

Mark was a frozen statue, emotionless.

“Mark, I know this is a shock. You finally have your answer.”

“Oh, shut up, Lynn.” And then the floodgates opened. Mark blubbered and fell against me. Snot came pouring out of his nose. He rocked back and forth trembling. Jolted by his response, I was helpless to use words to soothe Mark until I

hugged him. His search was over for now. Mark didn't realize the next hurdle; facing the beast.

Mark asked, "Does your father even know he has another son?"

"Of course not. He knows that I was doing ancestry research and that's why I needed his saliva. And a couple of months ago I told him that I might have a son and joked that he would be a grandfather. Something he thought was impossible considering that I'm gay."

"When will I get to meet him?"

"Are you sure you're ready? Keep your expectations low. The beast is not very fatherly. He can be an asshole. Don't think he's going to welcome you or say he wants to get to know you. Actually, I don't know how he's going to react."

"Can you set something up? It is kinda scary but I need to do this. I want to see who I came from."

"He has emphysema and is supposed to be on oxygen but he's a strong guy. And he has the beginning of Parkinson's so now you know how you got stuck with that."

"Now I have a brother, too. How amazing. Thinking you were my father and now this switch. I was looking for a father and now I've found him and a brother. A much older brother."

I laughed and pushed him away, "I thought I was an only child and then you came along."

Mark laughed and then grasped my shoulders.

He kept rambling with joy, "It doesn't change anything that you are my brother. I am part of a family. No longer an alien. So much catching up to do. And now you can introduce me as your brother. I can't stop saying that I have a real live brother and father."

"Mark, let's plan on going out to visit Jack next Saturday."

Mark said, “Shouldn’t we be celebrating now? Break out the champagne.”

“Yes, but right now I’m an emotional basket case. I can’t even imagine what you are feeling. Tomorrow night, come here after work and we’ll properly rejoice.”

CHAPTER 23

The Meeting

Step one was finished. Step two would be an appointment with Jack. He needed to be on his best behavior because Mark's fragility and fuse-lit personality could unexpectedly detonate. I didn't want the meeting to be a wipeout. I wanted at least a week to mentally prepare myself and Mark for this rendezvous.

After Mark left, I reached out to Brett, "I need to see you." He arrived in the late afternoon, saw the distressed lines on my face, and said, "Let's go to Malibu for dinner and watch the sunset. You can tell me what's going on."

I pleaded with him, "Just grip me now." The warmth from Brett's body commingled with my brittle nerves. We were congealing. I didn't want to tell him about Mark and Jack yet, so I let him lead me into the bedroom for an afternoon delight. At least a genie had granted me a temporary reprieve from my angst.

We ended the afternoon with a drive to Malibu with a painted red sky that collapsed into the ocean. We stopped off Pacific Coast Highway to witness the majestic sunset. I wanted to believe Brett could repair me. Absorbing the presence of God and Brett's hand grasping mine was rapturous heaven. I wouldn't break the spell by talking about the day's event. This relationship with Brett didn't need any more drama.

On Monday morning, plotting the call to Jack consumed me. I wished I never told Mark about him but I was stuck with tackling the ridiculous reunion between father and son.

“Dad, I’m going to come visit you this Saturday. I’m bringing Mark. Remember he’s the man who said he was my son. It turns out he isn’t my son.”

“So, then I’m not a grandfather. Shit. I figured your sperm would never make a baby. Why are you bringing him?”

I gulped. Did I need to tell him why Mark was coming? Let him wonder.

On the drive the following Saturday, I insisted we listen to Leontyne Price’s *Aida*. I told Mark, “I want you to give opera a chance and there is no one better than Leontyne Price. Her voice is like an instrument. I’ll explain why she is called a lyric soprano with juice.” I wanted to relax and avoid thinking about the coming trauma. Mark agreed. Between his foot tapping, trembling and vacant stare, I saw terror in his eyes. He was in his make-a-good-impression outfit. Linen beige jacket, golden brown tie, and yellow cotton shirt. I was proud of Mark.

When I parked the car Mark said, “Can we wait a minute until we go in? I’m panic-stricken. This is something I’ve wanted for so long and now that it’s happening, I’m getting cold feet. You’ve made him out to be such a horror, calling him the beast. I wish I had a drink.”

Whenever he mentioned alcohol, I worried that he’d inherited Jack’s drinking disease rather than his dimples and rectangle body type. But tackling alcoholism would have to be second priority, after Mark met our father.

Despite Dad’s drinking and smoking he’d always maintained muscles until the last ten years of decline. I wondered where his fat was hiding. Another reason I felt disconnected from Jack was because my traits of skinniness, except for my protruding belly, came from my mother.

“Look, Mark, we’re here. I haven’t told him why I brought you so if you don’t want to explain who you are that’s okay.

See how it goes. Who knows, there is a chance that you'll tolerate him.”

Mark was tranquilized as we walked towards the building. Mark stopped me before entering Dad's room, “Lynn, why don't you go in first. Just tell him I'm a friend. Just make something up about me wanting to meet him.”

“Okay. I've thought of something.”

Dad had the screaming football game on when I said, “Hello.” He muted the television.

“Lynn. Another visit. Are you feeling guilty? Seems like I just saw you.”

“I brought Mark. You remember I told you about him. He wanted to meet you. He has no family and even though the DNA showed I wasn't his father; he still wants me in his life. And you're part of my life, too.”

I motioned for Mark to enter as I sat in the corner far away from the melodrama that I knew was coming.

He could barely speak, “Hello, Mr. Pinchas.” Mark's eyes were taking in the image of this man. Searching for some resemblance. Did the shape of his ears match his? Trying to absorb facing the person who was instrumental in making him. Jack was staring back at him. Jack's face paled into a flushed white mask. He refused to look at Mark's eyes, as though they would burn his corneas. His breath was shaky like his hands, and then Jack's head began to droop.

“Lynn, get me some water. I don't feel well. Call the attendant. Maria something.”

I jumped out of my chair to grab Maria, telling her to bring some water to my father.

Maria said, “Are you causing trouble, Jack? Trying to scare your son. Drink this and you'll feel better. Does your oxygen tank need to be refilled?”

Jack shook his head and quickly slurped the water.

I told Maria, “Thank you. Maybe Dad had a panic attack.”

“No, your father is strong as an ox. He’s just playing with you. Looking for sympathy.”

Revived Jack said, “Who are you? You remind me of someone. Do I know you? You are scaring me. Stop staring at me. Get out of here.” Mark’s tongue stopped working and he left the room.

“What’s going on, Lynn? You have a strange look on your face. What are you not telling me? I’m not stupid. There is something about this Mark.”

“Let me go get him, Dad.” The hallway was deserted. Maria said, “That guy left the building.”

I found him crumbling on a bench, holding his knees and sobbing.

“Do you want to go, Mark? I warned you about him.”

“No. It’s such a shock to see someone who looks like me. I can’t do it. I’m afraid of how he’ll react when I tell him.” Mark’s tremor was becoming more pronounced when he talked.

“Do you want me to tell him?”

“I don’t know, Lynn. Just stay with me.” I was crying watching Mark. The beast had perfected his skill of piercing the vulnerable, like an archer throwing poison darts. It was further proof that Jack wasn’t a tangible human being. Surely not the way he treated me.

After my emotional calm composed Mark, I encouraged him to return to Jack’s enclave. Shortly after he entered the room Mark blurted, “I’m your son.” When those words filtered through my ears, my stomach got punched. The reality is that I could never call Mark my son.

Jack said, “Bullshit. Lynn is my only son. Stop bothering an old man.”

“Sir, we tested the DNA and my cells match yours.”

“This is a joke, right?”

I explained, “No, Dad, he’s correct.”

“My mom was the prostitute you had sex with.”

Jack was distraught. His eyes were darting when he said, “It’s impossible. You can’t be my son. Go away.”

“I have the letter from my mom that she gave to the doctor who later pronounced her dead.” The high-speed pitch of the drama in the room was crushing the three of us. Mark couldn’t hold his tears in during the confrontation.

“Please listen to me. I was given away by my mom. I grew up in foster homes. I had nobody until I found Lynn. When I found out mom was dead, I hung onto the hope I could find my father. Please, sir. I’m not asking for anything from you. Just that I’d like to get to know a little about you.”

How could Jack resist these pleas? You’d think he would be happy to have another heir. A straight man who could give Jack grandchildren. I knew that’s what Jack would want. He must stop being an asshole to Mark.

And then just as the sun streamed into the room, Dad said, “Lynn, could you leave us alone. I want to talk to my son alone.” A beacon of magic for Mark had occurred when I left the room. The appreciative joy in Mark’s face came from Jack’s acknowledgment that he was his father. Had solar energy replaced Jack’s toxic electricity?

When I left the room Maria cornered me, “You okay, Lynn. Who is your friend?”

“He is my half-brother. I just found out about him.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. You should be happy.”

“I want to be.”

When Maria disappeared to check on another resident, I leaned against the door to Jack’s room while time lagged. If I sat, I was afraid I would coil like a snake unable to unwind and if I did uncurl, I would hiss at Mark and the beast. What was going on between Jack and Mark? Would Jack’s temper spiral? My soul longed for an open-air meditation space while I waited. I tried to use my mantra to take me to an island surrounded by see-through royal blue water until Mark was shaking me, “Your father wants you to come back. I’ll wait out here for you.”

“What happened, Mark? What did he say? You look different. Things must have gone well.”

“Oh God, Lynn. At first, he scared me. He wanted to know if I was queer like you. I said as far as I know I was straight. Then he talked to me. I mean not like you but he said he was sorry.”

I replied, “Sorry about what? He didn’t know you even existed.”

“I know. When I showed him the letter and how my mom thought you were my father, he was surprised. He wished she had contacted him.”

“I can’t believe it. Sounds almost normal...well except for the gay question.”

“When I started talking about sports, he went crazy.”

“Figures. I never had anything in common with Jack.”

“Go say goodbye, Lynn. I’ll wait out here.”

I didn’t have the right to be jealous or angry that he could be more of a father to Mark than he was to me. Mark’s elation was overcoming my toxic link with Jack. Having a sibling was going to make me whole.

Jack was grinning when I entered his room.

“I asked Mark if he would move me out of here and I could live with him.”

“You didn’t do that.”

He smirked and told me, “He said he would try to arrange that. He wants to get to know me. He’s a good son, wanting to take care of his father. Not like you, throwing me in this dump.”

“Fine. And why don’t you let him pay for your incidentals? You think you can keep up this good behavior? It’s an act. Wait until he finds out what you’re really like. You’re a poor excuse for a father.”

“Fuck you. I wish you weren’t my son.”

I marched off, seized Mark, and departed the building. It was inconceivable that Jack could discard me like a piece of garbage.

“What’s the rush? You didn’t even let me say goodbye to my father.”

“Did you tell him you would have him move into your apartment? That you would care for him?”

“I didn’t say that exactly. I have that second bedroom since my roommate left.”

“Well, that’s what he thinks. I can’t believe you would do that. He’s a sick old man and you want him living with you. He needs help with bathing and cooking his meals. You haven’t thought this out, Mark.”

“Why are you so angry, Lynn? You want to deny me getting to know him.”

“He treats me like shit and you enter his life and it’s like you’re the son he’s always wanted.”

“I don’t understand you. I’ve been looking for this for my whole life. And even if he’s an asshole, I’m still a part of him.”

“I can’t take this emotional rollercoaster. First, I’m your father, then your half-brother, and now Jack wants to disown me.”

Mark tried to stop my disintegration with an embrace but I refused. I held my tongue before I spit out any more hurtful words towards Mark. It was the beast that I loathed and needed Brett’s magic to get me back on track.

We drove silently back to West Hollywood with only Leontyne Price filling the dead air in the car.

When Mark exited the Camry, he told me, “When you come to your senses, we should celebrate as brothers. I’ll buy you a drink and you can forget about your father. Just focus on our relationship.”

I forced a smile and said goodbye. I reached for my iPhone and punched Brett’s number.

“Hi, I need you right now.”

The crawling back to my condo in a fully defeated mode was excruciating. Ripping off all my clothing and dunking myself in a scalding hot shower to get the grime off my skin brought a pittance of relief. Desperate for an explosion, I draped myself in a sexual cocoon. I couldn’t wait for Brett so I masturbated, finishing with an ear-piercing scream. The exhaustion brought on a nap that accomplished forgetting about the beast while I awaited my savior, Brett.

I dreamed of my last year at Burroughs Junior High. Every day during lunch I sat alone in the outside cafeteria in a lonely corner. A hotdog and fries along with Jello filled my plate on the lunch tray. The bully of the month Richard strutted by and lashed out with, “What have you got to eat, girl baby Pinchas?” I ignored the taunt and proceeded to consume the food so I could escape. Richard took the plate from me and shoved it into my face. Gooey mustard, ketchup and Jello were congealing

around my face. I tried to stand. “Where you going, faggot? Too afraid to stick up for yourself, baby queer?”

A familiar voice came from around the corner.

Mark appeared in my dream and said, “Don’t you ever touch my brother. If I see you anywhere near him, you’ll be sorry.”

Even though Mark was two years younger than me in my dream, he had been working out and was a forbidding presence. I thought I was supposed to be protecting him when we walked to school together, but now, he had saved my ass. The school bell was chiming and summoning us back to afternoon class. But the ringing didn’t stop and I woke from my sweet dream, a hallucination that Mark was my brother when I was growing up. The ringing buzzer must be Brett.

“Lynn, you sounded so distraught on the phone. What’s going on?”

I was horrified seeing the ripped denim tight shorts Brett was wearing. Brett the hustler came to mind. I had to remember he was twenty years younger than me.

“Just hold me, Brett.” Uncontrollable weeping into Brett’s large frame was curative. I didn’t hold back my reckless emotions.

“Did someone die?”

“No, although I wonder if this is more painful.” I began the story of Mark’s arrival, the DNA testing, the surprising need for me to be a father and the beast. Brett pensively started talking, “What a hell of a story. You know one thing bothers me about all this testing. I wanted to be sure I understood something. So, you had results saying you and Mark had no connection.”

“Correct, no matching cells. I wasn’t his father.”

“But if you were brothers, well half-brothers, shouldn’t there have been a DNA match? If you had the same father but a different mother there had to be some gene similarity, right?”

“Yes, there should have been. You know with all this high drama I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I don’t want to cause you any more grief. But if this is really true then Jack may not be your father.”

“What did you say?”

“Jack isn’t your father.”

“But that would mean that my mom had sex with someone else who fathered me, not Jack.” I was responding robotically without processing the possible shocking revelation.

“It seems to me you need to compare your saliva with Jack’s to prove this.”

I pondered, “Oh God. This is starting to make sense. I was born less than nine months after they married. Mom would have been pregnant at the altar. But why didn’t she tell me? And the beast never said anything. Despite his poor parenting skills and abuses, it seemed like he thought of me as his son.”

“Maybe because your mom died when you were eighteen, she never got a chance to tell you.”

“But we were so close. Why did she keep it secret? And will Jack ever tell me the truth?”

Brett tried to reassure me, “Let’s not jump ahead of ourselves. Wait until you get the DNA back.”

“I always felt like an extraterrestrial around the beast. What if I’m an orphan now? This would explain everything. And now that Mark shows up, Jack feels like he has a real flesh and blood son. I have nothing. Not even a sibling.” I hated wallowing in front of Brett.

He held my hands and said, “You have me, Lynn.”

“I can’t wrap my head around all of this. You don’t know how I’ve been feeling about being a father, a mentor, someone to leave a piece of me when I die. And when I got over that disappointment, I was going to be a big older brother to Mark.”

“Do you really believe Jack is suddenly going to turn into a father?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll contact the Ancestry Help and have them do another comparison.”

“In the meantime, we can play.”

“Are you trying to take advantage of me, Brett? You think making love to me will solve all my problems?”

He laughed, “If I put a magic spell on you and have you drink a special potion.” And when he started nibbling at me, I was lost.

In the early morning Brett had been cuddling me so I daintily extricated myself from his luscious fleshy arms. Mornings were my most productive time for my daily blog or if I had a burst of creativity, a continuation of my memoirs. When I looked at my iPhone there were a bunch of text messages from Mark asking me to call him. What could he possibly want?

I cooked my daily staple oatmeal for Brett and left it on the stove as it turned into a creamy delight. Brett came from behind, squeezing my waist.

“What’s for breakfast? I’m starving.” We kissed, devoured the oatmeal topped with fresh strawberries, and whipped through the Los Angeles Times.

“Brett, listen to this. There is an interview about you. When did this happen? That’s a big deal.”

“I didn’t know exactly when it would appear. I am hoping it leads to some better paying gigs. Apparently, this reporter Robin Carian saw me at the Hocus Pocus and thought I would

be perfect for a new series she was doing on unusual professions.”

I read part of the interview to Brett, “And it says you are going to Colon, Michigan. It’s known as the “Magic Capital of the World”. In the 1920s this famous magician Harry Blackstone settled there and he formed the Blackstone Magic Company. And he invited Australian magician Percy Abbot to visit. Abbot began this annual event “Abbots Get-Togethers” for amateurs and professional magicians.”

“Isn’t that exciting, Lynn? I was going to ask you to come.”

I wondered why he hadn’t mentioned this big news to me. Were we already on different wavelengths? This spanking new relationship was looking for a communal link similar to what I had with Gilbert. We enjoyed each other but I was fifty and I needed substance. A common language for the arts. Brett never mentioned Sondheim. Had he ever been to the opera, read a Joan Didion book or gone to a Van Gogh exhibit? I didn’t care that he wasn’t Jewish but being part of the tribe with Gilbert deepened our relationship. Brett was obsessed with his career, rightly so. But I imagined him touring throughout the country building an audience and name recognition. I fell back to wanting to father Mark or at least be a big brother.

“Brett, do you want to go to the Huntington Library and Gardens? The gardens should be in bloom and there is a new collection of books they just acquired. The first folio of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is on display.”

“I’d love to but I’m working on a new act. Trying to combine more advanced juggling with magic is challenging. But it will be my calling card. Brett, The Juggling Magician. I’ll take a rain check.”

“Promise? Thank you for last night. I am in a much better place. Oh, I’ve got to call Mark and see what his texts were all about.”

Brett enveloped my mouth in his before he departed. I didn't want the glow to dissipate the reality of getting Ancestry Help to do a check of my cells and Jack's. After Brett left, a rare memory of Jack being something resembling a father hit me in 1991.

CHAPTER 24

Coming Out

I had blocked out my experience of coming out in 1991 until a classmate read her story about the first time she had sex. The teacher, Peter, kept reiterating that writer's block could be overturned when you listened to incidents from the past from other students. Triggering a hit was how Peter had framed it.

Why was the milestone of hitting twenty-one weighing me down in 1991? I ended up successfully transferring to UCLA after a single semester at Los Angeles City College and had finished the road of being imprisoned by numbers. At least having a CPA license would give me a pathway to moving out and having my own apartment. Being a virgin at twenty-one was an embarrassment. Trapped in a locked sexual cellar. I hadn't come to terms with my sexuality.

The Gold Coast gay bar on Santa Monica Boulevard was a short drive in Dad's lemon clunker Chevy which he had gifted me. This was a first-time event at a gay bar. The smoky darkly lit room rendered the powder keg experience less threatening. The local gay rag, Frontiers, had an advice column with hints about finding a man. Don't look desperate. Smile. Feel confident even if you are scared. Have a mint to ensure you don't have bad breath. Relax. Enjoy yourself. Buy a beer so you have something to do with your hands. Even if you don't meet someone you can chalk it up to practice.

The stenchy smell when I entered encouraged me to turn around. Instead, I punished myself by squeezing past boys in search of a wall for hugging. During the pursuit, a shirtless bartender was a whirlwind of energy at the dark wood counter where a row of West Hollywood stereotyped muscular guys

lined up for libations. Each man was a walking advertisement for hair products and faces used to advertise perfectly aligned skin pores. Marky Mark's "Good Vibrations" was blasting through the oversized speakers. I was lost in nerves. After waiting fifteen minutes to get a Corona, I was ready to bolt.

A compatriot moved towards me. Cursed with the same leftover acne scars I possessed, he smiled and said, "Is this your first time?" He was shorter, chubbier, and older than the requisite model height of six-foot men populating the Gold Coast.

A gulping response after swallowing a slug of beer "Yes. It's my twenty-first birthday and I wanted to celebrate."

"Not sure if this is the right place. It's noisy tonight. Wouldn't you be better off with your friends at The Carriage Trade on Beverly?"

"Maybe I should go. I'm not having a good time." He touched my hand, never letting go.

"Hold on. I know a place where we can party."

The relief of being able to breathe fresh air after departing the bar was exuberating.

"By the way, I'm Tomas. My apartment is near here. Did you want to come?"

"Yes. I'm Lynn." I was confident that I would bust my cherry and no longer be cursed with being a twenty-one-year-old virgin. The night air was creating excitement during the swiftly paced hand in hand walk.

"You're so quiet."

"Oh sorry. I'm a little nervous. I've never done this before."
"Done what."

"Gone to a strange man's apartment. I don't know anything about you."

Tomas laughed, “Do I look strange to you? I’m not going to hurt you, Lynn. You said you wanted something fun for your birthday.”

His apartment was stark naked...nothing adorning the walls. A lonely Craftsman Table Lamp sat on the end table of his white heavily cushioned couch. The spare antiseptic furnishings looked untouched. I wondered if he lived here. The kitchen counters were bare.

“Did you just move in? Everything is so clean.”

“No, I just like to keep things neat and in their place. No clutter. Did you want to drink anything?”

“No, that’s okay.”

“Sit down. Now you’re making me nervous standing like that.”

Plopping down on the couch relieved the tension. I popped a mint in my mouth before he sat by me.

“What do you like to do, Lynn?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, sexually. What are you into?” I had no clue. I wished he just started kissing me and gotten it over with.

“You are so sweet.” Tomas seized my shoulders and began kissing. Feeling his tongue burrowing deep in my mouth was enriching until Tomas strapped me down against the couch. I became frightened not recognizing sex would be this rough. Getting yanked into the bedroom minutes later was menacing.

Tomas proceeded to squalor any sexual pleasure while ripping off both of our garments. I heard the jockey underwear thread.

“Tomas, stop it. You’re scaring me.”

“You want this, Lynn.”

“No, get off me.”

Tomas ignored the words. After the sound of a rubbery tear and condom snapping, I tightened my ass to try to stop the assault. Tomas’s weight and the way he was clasping my arms left me immobilized and helpless. I was being pulverized, as though a Roto Rooter snaked up my ass.

“Come on, Lynn, relax. I’ll let you do me afterwards.”

“No. I can’t do it. It hurts. Stop.”

The pumping again and again. Searing pain riveting through my insides until termination.

“Do you want to fuck me, Lynn?” I ran to the bathroom and regurgitated. I collapsed to the floor and hugged the toilet bowl until the nausea faded. When the clothes were reattached to me, I left and robotically walked to my parked car taking the mutilation I had suffered to the center of the earth so no gaseous memory fumes could escape. This humiliating rape would never be revealed. I wanted to return to the comfort of being in the closet.

After driving a block, the car died. Panicked flooding of the accelerator failed to revive the engine. Miles from home, and stranded at one in the morning, I had to call Dad, “The car stalled. Can you come and get me at Fairfax and Santa Monica?” His slurred response, “I was sleeping but now that I’m up, I’ll come help you,” unnerved me that the beast would be driving drunk. When he arrived thirty minutes later sobered up, he told me the auto club had been called. Together we waited two shivering hours until the truck arrived. The yearning to be comforted by my father after the assault filled my shell. I kept apologizing to him, “I’m sorry I woke you up.” The sound of knees clattering and an uncontrollable trembling elicited Dad’s words, “Here, Lynn, take my jacket to warm up.” Sliding the wool sleeves into my twiggy arms brought my temperature back to normal. His sympathetic look of concern

and action made me temporarily question my reframe of *he hates me and I hate him*.

The fear of AIDS encouraged the taking of the HIV test immediately. Folklore about holes in condoms that could spread the disease corrupted my sleep. A wave of relief rippled through me after receiving negative results, not infected. The trauma of the evening became inaccessible memories for almost thirty years. Again, I had bitten the bullet about not getting infected.

When the words of this chapter hit the pages of my memoirs the question as to why I had been celibate for most of the 1990s had been answered along with the source of sexual performance issues. Finally, would I allow myself the luxury of believing that behind Jack's monstrous parenting he loved me?

CHAPTER 25

Fathers

“**M**ark, sorry, I didn’t see your texts until this morning.”

“I felt like we had unfinished business yesterday. That I had hurt you and that wasn’t my intent.”

I asked, “Wanna make it up to me by going to the Huntington Library and Gardens this afternoon? I can never get enough of seeing *The Blue Boy* in the museum. Plus, there is a new exhibit with only American painters and authors.”

“Okay. I’ll be ready for you to scoop me up at one so we have all afternoon. And we must have tea in the Japanese garden that you keep promising to take me.”

Two Pinchas brothers would be on a bonding adventure.

Mark entered my vehicle and I could immediately see his alteration since the discovery of his parentage. A tranquility roamed through his face. As though his ears, nose, eyes, and mouth had been rearranged. The frown had been eliminated but the tremor was still present.

“Mark, when you were diagnosed with early Parkinson’s disease did you ever get a second opinion or follow up with any new drugs that might have been developed?”

“No, I’ve been really lax about that. This quest to find my father had been consuming me.”

“You know I could ask around for a doctor who specializes in that area. I would go with you if you like.”

“I am on Obamacare so I might be limited to who I can see but I would love for you to help.”

“And maybe the genetics from Jack could help too.”

“Lynn, I brought this CD for us to listen to while we drive. It’s Leonard Cohen. I don’t know if you like him but his gravelly voice and poetic lyrics are explosive.”

I hadn’t been a fan of his music but when I listened to the lyrics with Mark in the car, I was overwhelmed. The lines in “Bird on A Wire” took me out of myself when Leonard talked about if he’d been unkind or been untrue, it was never you.

The remainder of the sparkling day filled our senses with the aromatic blue roses in the garden, the glut of American master paintings topped by Mary Cassatt’s *Breakfast in Bed*, and the original books of Mark Twain. During the Jasmine tea consumption, I asked Mark, “How are things going with our father? Have you seen him since we visited?”

“We got together last weekend. I wanted to take him out to lunch at Brent’s Deli. He was in a foul mood and I thought it would cheer him up to get him away from the Jewish Home Village.”

“Brent’s is famous for their corned beef sandwiches. He must have loved that.”

Mark’s eyes drooped and he said, “It didn’t go well. Very awkward with the oxygen. He kept pulling the nostril plugs out. Saying he didn’t need them. But I could see how much trouble he had breathing without the oxygen.”

“Yes, I can only take him in short dosages.”

“And I really screwed up about wanting him to move into my apartment. It would never work. He was angry when I tried to explain why I couldn’t do it.”

“Are you getting to know him?”

“Not really. We talk about sports but we don’t have anything else in common. He hardly asks anything about me. I brought beer and between the two of us we knocked off a six pack.”

“What about your mom?”

“He says he has no memories about the evening. It’s all sordid. You haven’t even told me what went on.”

“Do you really want to know about your mom’s life as a prostitute?”

I was surprised that this triggered Mark’s tears. There would have been zero value in sharing my memories of having sex with Jane. It would prick his heart. I worried about Mark’s recreational drinking that kept populating his life, dreading he had inherited that vicious alcoholic gene from Jack.

“Lynn, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I went to all this trouble to find him. I was idolizing what would happen. That he would be a loving father. But you know Jack. That isn’t in him.”

“Looking for a magic trick, Mark? It’s still new. I never stood a chance with him but at least you talk about baseball strikes, touchdowns, and dribbling. And you’re straight. You could bring a girlfriend for Jack to meet. And you could give him grandchildren.”

“That would be a miracle. I can’t get the hang of dating.”

“I’m not giving you any pointers. I barely know how to hook up with men.” We laughed, ate our almond cookies, and let the floral tea aroma percolate in our mouths. The exquisite day ended and I went back to wallowing about the final DNA test that I would ask for tomorrow. The web of love I was weaving around Mark as a son or brother had become as frail as my nerves.

Ancestry Help reluctantly agreed to another test. Why would they care? They were making a ton of money off me. I was assured the waiting time would be no more than seven working days. I considered having Brett with me when I looked at the computer summary. Better off doing it alone. I could let myself be demolished without holding back in front of Brett.

I kept talking to myself during the waiting game. *Lynn, no matter what it shows, you've created a family with Mark.* The gut wanted Jack to be my father and Mark a half-brother so this saga could be over.

The day of reckoning email had notified me that results were updated from the new DNA outcome. After praying for solace before I opened the website, I gasped at the statement that Jack was in fact not my father. No comparative DNA cells. My negativity went directly to the realization that I had been denied a brother or son because there was no blood link to Mark. I was worn out from crying and screaming about those stupid tests. I didn't want to be in this soap opera *Days of Our Lives*. Who was my real father? Why didn't my mom tell me? Before Mark finds out, the beast needs to provide a good explanation for why I'm not his son.

In the distant past, a full Sara Lee cake and gobs of coffee ice cream would have allowed me to crash and burn. Maturity brought new ways to console myself without further destroying my stomach. Sondheim came to the rescue with a weepy "I'm Losing My Mind" and a licorice tea would have to suffice. I wanted to wallow in my cursed life and advertise my low self-esteem.

Dragging myself to the Jewish Home Village and filled with rage, I rehearsed what I would say to Jack. I didn't even acknowledge Maria when I entered the facility. Barging into Jack's room and slapping the television off, I had enough ammunition to destroy him.

"So, who the fuck is my father?"

"I'm your father."

"No, I had our DNA evaluated and we aren't related. You are nothing to me."

"What are you talking about, Lynn? I'm the one who brought you up. Paid for your schooling. You never needed to

work. I even helped you buy your first car. I've been a good provider. You are talking crazy."

"But you aren't my birth father. You didn't give life to me."

"Of course, I'm your father. You're confusing me. Dolores was my wife."

"Stop it, Jack. Tell me the truth. What was this big secret she was keeping from her parents? When we talked before you wondered if Mom had spoken to me before she died. She must have wanted to tell me she was already pregnant when you got married. You weren't my birth father."

Lynn shot back, "You're lying. No, that's not it."

"For Christ's sake just tell me what the secret was."

The beast rose from his chair and pointed at me, "I could never give birth to a homosexual. I'm glad you're not my son. Mark is a real man. He'll give me grandchildren."

I wanted to rip him apart. His abusiveness had commanded me to hide behind my weak persona until I discovered he wasn't my birth father. The paranoia that I was an alien was justified.

"You're a hateful old man. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know."

"Lying bastard!"

"Okay, Mr. big shit. You wanted to know what the secret your mom was hiding from her parents."

"You had a brother."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your mother told me she was planning to have an abortion, but miscarried in the sixth month. Never told her parents. They would have killed her. And they did find out anyway and disowned her. It had devastated Dolores. The guilt was

gnawing at her. She thought by confessing to me, she would stop mourning over the boy that had died. She blamed herself for wanting the abortion and that God had caused her to miscarry.”

“Why did she even want to tell me this secret before she died?”

“Guilty for giving up what would have been her first child. She wanted you to know she loved you. Would never give you up. Maybe she worried that if I told you about the planned abortion, that you would think less of her. I don’t know. She wanted you to know you might have had a brother. Asking her God for forgiveness. Penance.”

My stomach muscles were getting squeezed when I ran out of the room to get fresh air. My father’s revelation took me back to when Mom was in hospice care and on morphine. She had mumbled something about a brother. I had assumed she was referring to her own sibling, not realizing Mom’s last word had an alternate meaning. Fainting crossed my mind. Maria heard the shouting and cornered me, “Lynn, you look pale.”

“Can you get me some water? I’m afraid I’m going to pass out.” Maria quickly responded. Revitalized by the luscious water that allowed a continuation of Jack’s confession, I reentered his cave.

I hollered, “I don’t understand who my father was. I can’t take any more of these secrets and lies.” I had put mom on a pedestal and with these revelations, mom became a flawed human.

“Lynn, no more of your tizzy fits if you want to know what happened.”

Jack got attacked by a coughing fit that made his eyes stream. I noticed red blotches in the mustache area and remembered what Maria said, “Being on oxygen causes a lot

of dryness and can even make the nose bleed. It's not dangerous.”

“Are you okay? Should I get Maria? It looks like blood is dribbling out of your nose.”

“Just give me a tissue. It happens every day. That oxygen is screwing me up. I’d rather smoke and drink. I’m tired so let me finish what I think happened.”

I reframed my demeanor and became stoic as I listened to his tale.

“I told you how her parents wanted to pawn her off on me. She was beautiful to me despite being older. We hadn’t known each other very long but your mom kept telling me she wanted to get married to get away from her parents. I was glad that we eloped and didn’t have a big wedding.”

“A shotgun wedding? She was pregnant with another man’s child.”

“I swear I had no idea until you told me. You were born eight months after we got married but she said you were just slightly premature. I was young and stupid. I didn’t suspect.”

“So, Mom wasn’t even a virgin. I can’t believe you.” I turned away from the beast, not wanting to hear him spew out more lies.

“I didn’t care that your mother wasn’t a virgin. I was inexperienced. The only woman I had ever had sex with was a whore my father took me to when I was eighteen. Just like when I took you to a prostitute. And your mom’s story about having an abortion didn’t bother me. I felt sorry for her. Your mother still seemed so innocent and simple. Why would I think you weren’t my son?”

When I heard the rattling sound, I thought there was an earthquake aftershock. It was only when I turned around to face my father and saw his trembling hands and legs that I

understood how Parkinson's disease had been destroying his muscle control.

"Didn't you wonder that I didn't look anything like you?"

"So, you looked more like your mother. I didn't look at you and wonder if you were my kid."

"I just can't believe that she never told me or you."

"I don't know why. I'm shocked. How do you think I feel?"

"I don't care. And now I'll never know who my birth father is. I'm an orphan." The world flipped and I had to leave the prison to get a new perspective. Jack had sucked the life out of me and I didn't want to become a monster like him. I had to think about forgiving him if he was telling me the truth. I was fifty years old and my core had been peeled away. Mark found his father and now I had none. The DNA revelations enabled anger to replace tears. Would lashing out at mom at the cemetery solve anything? Those scattered thoughts had no release when I drove over the hill to West Hollywood.

CHAPTER 26

Looking

The iPhone possessed text messages from Mark and Brett but isolation defined me for the rest of the day. With Dr. Stillman's recent retirement, I had no objective voice to bounce off of. I doubted the rabbi could sort through the chain of events that had transpired.

Could a private detective find my birth father? Mark could give me some hints except in this case my birth certificate was false. It identified Dolores and Jack as parents. Upon arrival at my condo, I searched for the photo album dedicated to mom. There had to be a clue. It's inconceivable that mom kept this a secret from everyone and wouldn't even share it with me. The hammering questions were taking their toll until the iPhone purred and Mark's number streamed across the screen.

“Lynn, I texted you earlier today. You haven’t responded.”

“I’m in a bad mood and didn’t want to subject you to it.”

“Is there anything I can do to cheer you up?”

“I want to get out of my head. Any suggestions?”

“I’ll come over and surprise you.” I loved Mark. A real *mensch*. Mark had evolved from an insecure boy to a vibrant force. Why was parenthood tangled at me and then withdrawn? My purpose had dissolved. Mark must be my salvation in a different form. I went back to the leather-bound photo album, hoping for an answer until Mark’s appearance.

The early pictures were of Mom pushing me in a stroller. I studied her face and looked for clues. What was going through her head when she looked at me? Was she looking for characteristics that reminded her of my real father? Then a few

photos of our apartment at Chanukah. I remember mom saying, “This is our Chanukah bush. Each morning during the eight days of Chanukah there will be a gift under the tree.” The following photos were taken at temple. It looked like the Sisterhood gathered around a large table, playing cards or mahjong. The Sisterhood was a perfect outlet for her. She never socialized with the women outside of temple but I wondered if she had a confidante. I doubted if the middle-aged women from forty years ago were still alive or remembered Dolores. I stopped when I heard Mark’s buzz. I had created a face that was a mask of deception for Mark, edging out any remnants of my newfound orphan status. Internally gastric juices ate at my esophagus and gut.

“Hi. We’re going to the Self Realization Fellowship at the end of Sunset Boulevard. I’ve never been. We’ll make a new age spiritual day and end up at The Conscious Ray. What do you think?”

“Why not? It couldn’t make me feel any worse than I do now.”

Before the windy Sunset Boulevard emptied into Pacific Coast Highway, the Fellowship Center was carved into a hidden ten-acre plot of land off the Boulevard. Seeing the spring fed Lake Shrine threw both of us into an enchanted fairy tale. During the stroll the ducks, turtles, koi, and swans embraced us. Letting the smell of lotus flowers, fauna and flora open our nasal passageways rendered us speechless. There was an homage to all religions with sects of Buddhists, Moslems, Jews, and Christians camped at ports along the lake. The newfound relaxation gave me the impetus to talk to Mark.

“I did another DNA check that has nothing to do with you, Mark.”

“Wow. You are getting addicted to DNA testing.” I could hardly laugh.

“I’ve been so obsessed with figuring out who your father was, I’d completely missed a piece of this convoluted puzzle.”

Mark smiled and said, “I know there have been so many twists and turns. You being my father, you being my brother and Jack being my father.”

“I realized that something was off. It didn’t make sense that none of my cells matched yours if we both had the same father. How could that be?”

“I think I follow your thinking.”

“So, I thought, is it possible that Jack isn’t my father? I couldn’t believe it but it sorta made sense. To prove my theory, I had Ancestry Help compare my cells with Jack’s.”

Mark looked at me, “And of course they matched.”

“No. Jack is not my father.”

“What?”

“My mom must have had a lover before they got married. Jack says he was clueless.”

“Oh, God. I’m sorry, Lynn.”

“I feel like shit. My life is a lie. My mom never told me. I keep rehashing why she would keep it a secret. And I can’t believe anything Jack says.”

Mark tried to hug me before I disintegrated into tears. During the emotional recovery we entered the temple for a short meditation. The mood-altering afternoon begged for a sense of completion and The Conscious Ray was the grand finale. Nestled in Malibu Canyon, the candlelit outdoor woodsy dining, complete with tablecloths, was a sumptuous delight. The organic aromas from the kitchen gripped my stomach juices. The starvation for healing food would be satisfied during the analysis of the gourmet menu. Each item on the menu was ranked by colors for spirituality value. Potatoes and sunflower pesto garnished with sun-dried

tomatoes, bitter greens, pecorino cheese, and diver scallops were all local farm-sourced. Mark's insistence on drinking multiple glasses of cabernet was alarming. Thank goodness I had been to an Al-Anon meeting and could get advice about this discovery. I hoped I had learned the enabling lessons with Jack and could work with Mark to attend an A.A. meeting.

"Mark, do you think there is any chance I could find my birth father?"

"You're looking at the expert. It can be a father-son-brother project."

"You don't have to call me father or brother. I don't want you to lie just to make me happy. I know there is no blood connection."

"But you're wrong, Lynn. I witness families being created all the time. Especially the guys on the swim team. Today, the definition of family is fluid. I choose you to be my father."

"Are you trying to make me cry again?"

"Do you realize what you've done for me in the last six months? You gave me the ability to like myself. I found my birth father. Lynn, the unconditional love you've showered on me is priceless. I'm changed. In fact, I'm going back to school to finish college. I want to be a teacher."

Another sign from Gilbert. I prayed this wasn't a magic trick like the ones Brett performed.

"Mark, you know you've changed me too. After Gilbert died, I was soulless. When you arrived in the park, Lynn Van Winkle woke up. I had been given a purpose."

Then the waiter, Melvyn, insisted we try the hazelnut pudding flourless cake. If we didn't swoon the taste while we devoured their most popular dessert item, he would give us a refund. It surpassed our expectations. Finally, Melvyn told us

to take the winding brick pathway trail to see the crestfallen waterfalls and sycamore trees surrounding the restaurant.

And when Mark dropped me off at the end of the mythic day, he said, “You found my father for me. Now I’m going to find your father.”

I hoped if I found my birth father, I would stop rehashing my childhood and Jack’s mistreatment of me. Each time I wrote about my childhood, the result was cathartic pain.

CHAPTER 27

Why?

For the first five years of my life, I slept in a small crib in my parents' bedroom. Cocooning in the same room with my parents was a prescription to muzzle the recurring nightmare of drowning in the bathtub. Playing with rubber ducks created a swooshing sound that filled my ears and caused laughter. Lukewarm water slid off my limbs. The wrinkles on my waterlogged fingers converted me into a mermaid. My head was bobbing in and out of the bubble bath. Hands slapped the soapy water and made them splash against the shower curtain. When I laid on my back and dunked under the water, the deafening silence quieted the brain. Gills took in deep breaths. Lost in an underwater fantasy until I couldn't breathe. The pressure on the lungs hurt. Tight spasms. Would I be saved?

Jack complained about my presence but Mom would tell me, "Just ignore your father. You always have a place in our bedroom." I was sedated and hearing their breathing silenced fears of abandonment.

Dad professed poverty and not being able to afford a two-bedroom apartment. After I'd outgrown my crib and graduated to a bed, Jack said, "I'm going to set up a partition in the living room for Lynn. He should have his own bedroom now that he's five." On the first night that I was placed on a cot encapsulated by six-foot-high screens, the blood vessels in my throat shrieked. When I tired of screaming, I bit my tongue as though it was a piece of meat. The canvas cotton screens created claustrophobia. The blood that escaped from my mouth made mom scoop me up, "Jack, he's bleeding to death. We've got to go to the Emergency Room."

Jack responded, “Get a grip, Dolores. It’s nothing. If he’d stop screaming, he wouldn’t have hurt himself. Just have him gargle. I did the same thing when my father beat me.”

“Dolores, we’ve got to get a second bedroom. I can’t take his screaming every night.”

But even when we moved into a two-bedroom after my fifth birthday, I refused to sleep in the second space. Dad told me, “Look, Lynn, now you have your own room. I don’t even have my own bedroom. I share it with your mom. And you can sleep as long as you like. You won’t be disturbed by us.” Even the reeking smell of Dad’s alcohol and cigarettes had fabricated safety when I slept with my parents.

“Daddy, I want to be with you and mommy.”

“Get in bed, Lynn, I’m going to turn off the lights.” I stared at the ceiling, refusing to close my eyes. Scared that I would drown while sleeping. I worried that I was locked in when the door closed. I shouted, “Daddy, I need my blanket.” No answer. I cried again, “I want my blanket.” I couldn’t sleep without the soft wool against my skin. I scurried off the bed searching for an escape. Horror struck my bones when I found the doorknob to my parents’ bedroom wouldn’t move. I was trapped and with each scream I fell deep into the cavernous lagoon. Snotty tears covered my face. The voice box croaked after ten minutes of ricocheting through the apartment.

“Jack, I can’t bear to hear Lynn cry. Can’t we let him sleep in here one more night.”

“No, Dolores. He’s got to learn that he can’t get his way. My father would never put up with this bullshit.”

After I crawled back to my big crib, I willed myself to sleep. Nightmares stopped. I submerged any authentic emotion. In the future I would pretend to love my parents. Was my love for Ethan, Gilbert and Brett a sham? The origin of my panic

attacks and abandonment issues were unearthed and I hoped that I could relearn how to organically love Mark.

The writing of a memoir helped me regurgitate emotion and let it rise to the surface. I stopped playing the blame game. Love made a comeback when I looked back at my crappy life and forgave myself and Mom and Dad.

Epilogue

I met Mark at the Grove by the Third Street Farmers Market. The free clanging trolley gave us an overview of The Cheesecake Factory and Maggiano's. The overflowing crowd showed off the freedom of unrelenting consumption flowing from Nordstrom, Crate and Barrel, and the Apple store. Strolling the mock city street that copied Disneyland or a bitter slice of the play *Our Town* gave me a chance to congregate thoughts. After purchasing the latest Starbucks guilty pleasure, we settled onto a bench away from the surge of people.

“Mark, I know your roommate moved out. What would you think about moving into my place? I have a second bedroom.”

“Would it ruin our relationship?”

“Ha. I don’t think anything could change us.”

“I would save a ton of money which I’ll need now that I’m going back to school. What would Jack think?”

I smiled, “Don’t worry about Jack.”

I continued, “And one other big thing. It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. I want to adopt you.”

“You are full of surprises today. Amazing, I find my real father and now a man who has no blood connection wants to adopt me.”

“It’s a big step, Mark. I’ve done the research and since you are over eighteen, we don’t need approval from Jack. I want to do this.”

“Can I think about it, Lynn? You’ve caught me off guard. Springing two major events at me.”

I told him, “I think of you as my son and want to formalize it. I want you to have my inheritance, power of attorney and health directive.”

“I understand. I’m honored you want to do this. I still need time.”

“Of course. Take as long as you like. I’m not going anywhere.” During the hug I tried not to show disappointment with my open book facial expressions. Before Mark left, he said, “And I might have a girlfriend. One of the other checkers at Trader Joe’s asked me out.”

I laughed in horror at the prospect of Jack eventually having a grandchild as I walked away. I lost myself in the vendor cubicles that appealed to tourists under the tent of the Farmers Market. Mom loved finding bargains for scarves and oversized handbags being hustled in the minuscule stores. Even after thirty years she was still a part of me. She used to say, “Watch how I get them to lower the price.” She found merchandise that were seconds and pleaded with the owner, “See that loose thread. It could unravel. I don’t want to pay full price.” Mom was relentless and they finally gave in to her demands. I wondered why I didn’t inherit that skill as I searched for a large brimmed hat. Instead, I inherited her ability to give unconditional love.

With Mark I wanted to implant the skills I possessed. Temple attendance gave him an introduction to *tikkun olam* which translated to repair the world...the social justice that Jews were responsible for promoting. I wanted to believe I was repairing Mark or was Mark repairing me? If Mark had a drinking problem, I could help him navigate away from that addictive behavior.

The afternoon turned despondent with anxiety building into the evening. The waiting game to hear from Mark ripped away. The air stilled when the iPhone rang at 10 p.m. showing Mark’s phone number. “Lynn, I’ve thought about the adoption and

moving in with you. The realization that we aren't related is hard for me to understand but I've been looking for my father all my life and I thought I found him when I met Jack. But I realized I had already found my father, you, Lynn. And yes, I want to be able to call you, my father. I want to be your son. And what better way than to have you legally adopt me."

I cried, "I love you, my son, Mark."

The adoption process was completed within sixty days. And during that time my IBS symptoms took a long-needed vacation. A small gathering that included Brett, a few swim team members, and my rabbi, witnessed the event at the Santa Monica Courthouse. We huddled outside the brick building at nine in the morning, waiting for the glass doors to open. A brisk ocean breeze swept us together. After entering, we followed signs to the room where it would happen. The judge called Lynn Pinchas and Mark Lippman and he asked, "It says here that you, Lynn Pinchas, want to adopt Mark Lippman. Please tell me why I should grant this request?"

We looked at each other and I said, "Mark is my son and I want to share this with the world." Mark spoke, "Lynn is my father." The judge said, "Approved."

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Bio

After spending forty years as an accountant, Gordon retired in 2017 and started a new career as a writer. During 2020, Gordon had published work in Whoa Nelly Press, Wingless Dreamer, Two Hawks Quarterly, the Santa Monica College Journals Chronicles and On-Going Moments, and Gay Wicked Ways. In 2021 his novel *Shipped Off* was published and is also available as an audiobook. Ten of his autobiographical stories are available on the Queer Slam Episode 21, podcast called “Just Gordon.”

When he isn’t writing he’ll be cooking gourmet gluten-free meals, reading the latest Elin Hilderbrand novel, watching Alfred Hitchcock films, listening to anything by Barbra Streisand and walking 7,500 steps a day. Gordon has been a member of the oldest LGBT temple in the world, Beth Chayim Chadishim since 1990.